

A woman with long brown hair, smiling, wearing a red, long-sleeved, button-up dress with a full skirt. She is standing in a field of red poppies under a cloudy sky. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

SHONDA
CZESCHIN
FISCHER

A GROOM
for
ARABELLA

the
BLIZZARD
BRIDES


*A Groom for
Arabella*

THE BLIZZARD BRIDES #26



Shonda Czeschin Fischer

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A GROOM FOR ARABELLA

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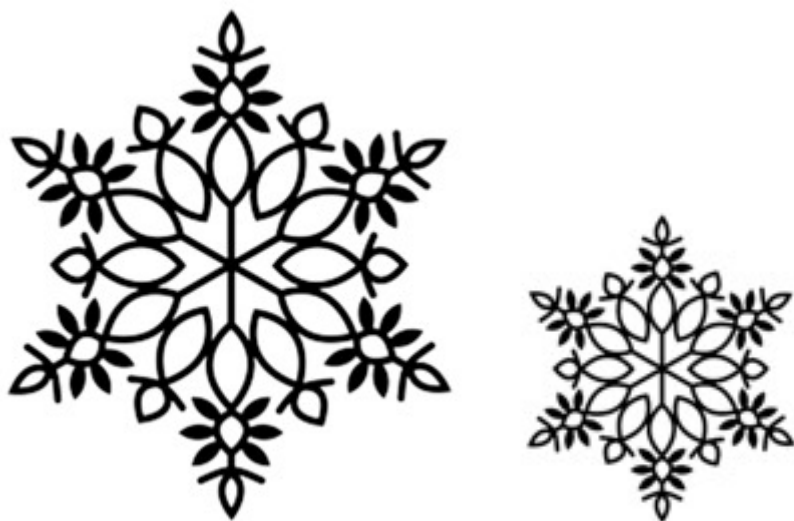
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But they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint. Isaiah 40:31.



I dedicate this book to Bella. You impress me with your sharp mind and your love for reading and writing. I'm proud to be your friend and see you doing great things in your future. May God bless you in all you do and carry you on the wings of much success.

Prologue



Chicago, Illinois 1878

The crack of the bat split the air as Grant Parker ran around the bases, sending fans into a frenzy of cheers. He waved to his fans as he made his way around home plate, bringing the score three to one against the Indianapolis Browns, winning the game. Walking into the dugout, his teammates slapped Grant on the back, chanting, Parker, Parker. Lifting his ball cap from his head, he wiped the sweat from his brow. Setting his hat firmly on his head with a smile, he laid his arm across his best friend Joe Talon's shoulder. "I'm hitting at the top of my game, buddy. It never felt so good. Did you hear that crowd?"

Joe rolled his eyes. "Yes, I heard them." Slipping out from under Grant's arm, he jogged backward as he shouted. "You better hurry before we miss all those pretty girls out front wanting autographs." Turning around, Joe disappeared into the locker room. Grant shook his head and laughed, hurrying to catch up. Finding Joe stepping out of the cage shower, he grabbed a towel and hurried to wash and

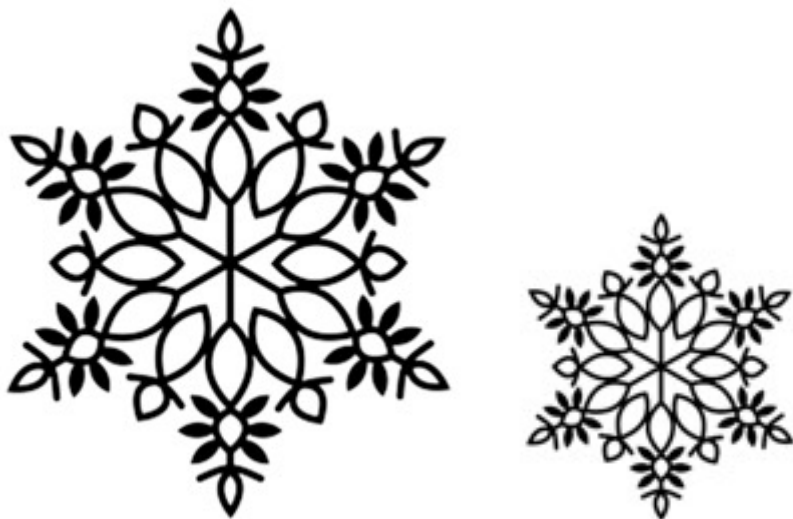
change before Joe left without him. His teammates looked forward to the signing after the game and the saloons.

Dressed and not a minute too soon, Grant and Joe made their way out front of the stadium with the rest of the team. Fans pushed and crowded their way to get as near to the players as allowed. Grinning as he stood back from the crowd of people, he spotted a curvy redhead with emerald eyes and a heart-shaped face. Her pink lips parted as her wide smile revealed even white teeth. Grant strolled toward her with a smile on his lips and a swagger in his steps. After a bit of flirting, he invited her for a Sunday afternoon carriage ride. Swapping his signature for her address, he signed his name on a piece of paper. Grant said his goodbye and made his way down the street with Joe to a nearby saloon. The sun slipped down over the horizon, leaving orange and pink streaks in the sky in its wake.

Stepping off the boardwalk, waiting for the many wagons and carriages to pass, Grant winced as pain shot through his knee. Lately, when he put weight on it for an extended amount of time, it protested with burning pain. With a limp, Grant crossed the street hoping Joe wouldn't notice. He stepped onto the boardwalk with clenched teeth before forcing a smile onto his face as Joe slowed for him to catch up. He managed to keep his regular gait as they neared the door of the saloon.

Lighting a cigar and taking a puff, Joe slapped Grant on the back. "All of them pretty single ladies just itching for a husband. I saw you talking to the pretty redhead. You better watch out, or you'll end up with a noose around your neck."

Grant chuckled. "Only when I'm too old to play ball, my friend, and not a moment sooner."



Last Chance, Nebraska, April

Arabella slid the bread into the oven as her seven-year-old son, Anthony, set the pail of milk on the table. Sighing, Arabella pushed a stray strand of hair away from her face. She needed to chop more wood for the stove, along with a million other things. Staring out the window, as a single tear ran down her cheek, she remembered how proud Luca was when they bought this farm. It wasn't much, but the two of them built on to the house and planted rows of corn with hard work. "Ma, are you sure you don't need me to stay home to help you with chores?" Anthony stood with his hands on his hips and a frown on his face.

Wiping the tear from her cheek, Arabella turned with a smile on her lips. "You, my young man, need to go to school. I will get the chores done and have supper on by the time you return."

"Oh, all right." Anthony picked up his books and lunch pail as he shuffled out the door.

Arabella plopped herself down in a chair at the table. Resting

her head in her hands, she closed her eyes as her thoughts went to the corn that needed planting soon. Pastor Collins's words echoed in her mind. "You can't stay here without a husband. Nebraska is no place for a woman without the protection of a man. Besides, how will you provide for Anthony and yourself? Are you going to work the farm?"

Her heart was still wounded from losing her husband and now she was expected to marry a total stranger. After all the men perished in the blizzard, Pastor Collins was adamant about each of the women finding a husband or leaving Last Chance. Celia Thornton came up with an idea to place an ad in the Matrimonial Times for husbands. When the letters arrived, each woman had to choose six letters and write to one man in those letters. Holding the letters in her shaking hands, Arabella closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Pounding her fist on the table, she stood up and grabbed the six letters she had chosen. Today wasn't the day. Soon she promised herself, but she just couldn't do it today. Arabella had a garden to tend, along with other things. She took the letters and laid them on her dresser with a deep sigh. Tomorrow maybe, but not today.

Her son seemed to do better than her with dealing with what had happened to his father. Luca seldom had the time to spend with the boy. Working the fields always seemed to come first with him.



* * *

The next day, as Arabella ripped the first letter open, she skimmed the messy handwriting. Since she couldn't read it, she tossed it aside. The second letter was from a man old enough to be her father, wanting someone to take care of him. Picking up the third letter, she noticed the neat, masculine handwriting.

With a shaking hand, she opened the letter. His name, Grant Parker, stated his age as twenty-seven. Grant had played in the National Baseball League for the Chicago White Stockings and now no longer played and set forth looking for a change. He longed to

find a job that took him away from the big city and offered long-term security. Since his professional days of baseball were over, he wanted to settle down somewhere quiet and start a family. He stated he knew hard work and grew up on a farm in Illinois. Grant described himself as six-foot-tall with blonde hair and blue eyes and physically fit. Arabella smiled to herself. A baseball player. She had heard of the game and knew it was a very physical sport.

She knew her situation with getting the corn planted on time, depended on her getting married quickly. Picking up pen and paper, she wrote Grant. His letter turned out to be casual and to the point, giving her hope he could be the groom she needed. Arabella felt he would be easy to get along with and would care for her and Anthony. After finishing her letter, she decided to mail it right away before she changed her mind.



* * *

Grant tired of sitting around doing nothing after his knee injury. The National Baseball League gave him his walking papers, and his money was dwindling fast. He needed to find a job. Joe had been paying the rent on the one-room apartment they shared, and although he didn't complain, Grant wasn't happy with it.

"Honey, I'm home." Joe laughed as he walked through the door. Tossing mail on the small, worn table, he glanced at Grant and winked. "Did you miss me?"

Grant pushed himself up from the couch. "I've got to find a job, and soon, I can't keep letting you pay my rent." Pulling out a chair at the table, Grant thumped down, resting the other leg on a stool as he grabbed for the letter laying there.

The envelope addressed to him was from an Arabella Sirrine. Her penmanship showed feminine and beautiful strokes, and as he opened it, the fragrance of roses tickled his nose. Arabella was asking him to come to Last Chance in Nebraska and marry her. Grant gave a slight headshake as his eyebrows bunched together.

Why was she writing to him? Of all things, why would this Arabella ask him to be her husband?

"Joe, I got a letter from some woman in Nebraska asking me to marry her. This letter must be some joke the team is playing on me. I've never met a woman named Arabella or anyone else from Nebraska." Grant waved the paper at Joe.

Joe gave Grant a smirk and snatched the letter from his hand. "That's because I wrote to her as you."

"You did what?" Grant gripped the table for support as he stood. "Why would you do a thing like that? And how do you know this Arabella?"

Putting his chin out, Joe said in a mocking voice. "I will only marry once I'm retired from baseball and not a moment sooner. Do you not remember saying that to me?"

Grant's face turned red. "I don't even know this woman. Why do you think I would up and marry a stranger? That is not a decision for you to make."

Joe swung around and waved a hand about the room. "Look, Grant! We live in a one-room apartment in the middle of downtown Chicago. The noise and filth are bad enough, but what do you have to look forward to every day? Do you want to live this way for the rest of your life? Go on an adventure, meet new people where there are wide open spaces and fresh air."

Joe stomped across the room. Looking over his shoulder, he shook his head as he walked out the door, slamming it behind him.

Grant rubbed the back of his neck with a frown. Joe was right. If he went to Nebraska to meet Arabella, he might start over and do the one thing he had always wanted to do as a kid. He never told a soul that he loved to create beautiful things with leather. His father would never allow it and would say a son of his needed to do physical labor. Anything less was lazy and unacceptable, according to his old man. Picking up the letter, Grant read what Arabella had to say. She stated she had black hair and brown eyes and was of average height and that she had a son, Anthony, age seven, and lived on one hundred acres.

A slight smile graced Grant's face as he remembered running barefoot through the tall grass when he was a boy. He could almost feel the fresh air and sunshine as he fished. Sure, there were days of hard work, but it somehow left him proud. Suddenly, feeling inspired, Grant searched for a pen and paper. Maybe being married

and owning a farm in Nebraska wouldn't be so bad after all. If he got there and she was not someone he could spend the rest of his life with, maybe he could get a job there or start his own business. After all, he still had his savings.



* * *

Dark clouds brought a chill to the air as a drizzle of rain dotted the dusty street. Arabella pulled her shawl tighter around her shoulders as she climbed down from her wagon. Praying that the sky wouldn't let loose a torrential downpour on her, she made her way into the telegraph office and spotted Faith Thornton sorting mail. Faith looked up, and smiled as she made her way to the counter. "Good morning, Arabella."

"Good morning, Faith." Resting her hands on the smooth counter, Arabella licked her dry lips. "Do you have any mail for me today?"

Faith thumbed through the mail with scrunched eyebrows. "I know I saw a letter in here for you. Oh, here it is."

Biting her lip, Arabella took hold of the letter and stared at it. Grant's answer was in the palm of her trembling hand. She didn't know whether to cry from the injustice of having to remarry so soon or to laugh hysterically.

Faith reached out and took hold of Arabella's hand. "Are you alright? I know that look because I've seen it on so many women who felt the same way when they had to remarry so soon. I don't know if it helps any, but I know many who are happy now."

The counter cut into Arabella's side as she leaned up against it for support. Locking eyes with Faith as a single tear ran down her cheek, she nodded in response. Tucking the letter in her dress pocket, she hurried out into the light rain that had fallen. With quick steps, she walked around a few mud puddles as she climbed into the wagon. Pulling a tarpaulin from under the seat, Arabella pulled it up over her to keep the rain off. The stiff leather reins bit into her fingers as she gave them a flick to send the horses on their

way.



Arabella had waited to read the letter until she had time to sit alone on her bed. Memories of Luca loomed in every room of this house. They shared deep secrets and made plans for their future in this very room. It's where she gave her whole being to him, heart, body, and soul. There were times she still smelled him and heard his sweet words of love. With a shaking hand, she reached into her pocket, retrieving the wrinkled envelope. As she ran a finger under the flap to open it, a tear slid down her cheek. *Luca, forgive me, but I have no choice. I will always love you.* Quickly reading over it, she let the paper slip from her hands onto the bed. Grant said yes, he would arrive in two days. She barely had time to prepare her heart or Anthony for the change about to take place.



The arduous journey by train was putting a strain on Grant's sore knee. Limping down the train platform to catch the stagecoach helped to loosen up the stiffness in his knee as thoughts of boarding the crowded stage set his mood to a foul one. A cool breeze rustled his hair as he took in the vast land that stretched out before him. People rushed past him as they stepped off the train, yet the crowd was nothing like he found in Chicago.

As he lifted his face to the sky, Grant inhaled sunshine and horses while a sense of peace washed over him. *No city smells here, no siree, nothing but fresh air and sunshine.* Climbing into the stagecoach as they loaded his bags on the stage, Grant whistled a jaunty tune. There was only one other passenger besides himself, leaving him plenty of room to stretch out his leg.

With a jerk, the coach bounced down the dirt road, stirring up dust. Leaning his head back to rest his eyes, he could taste the grit already settling on him; what he wouldn't give for a shave and a nice hot bath. Now, sitting on the hard seat as it pressed into the back of his thigh, he shifted. His mind wandered to Arabella. Was she pretty? The vision he conjured up in his mind may be false. What if she was unpleasant to look at or liked to nag all the time? Sitting upright, he clenched his hands as his breathing sped up. Coming to Nebraska was a bad idea. All his thoughts had been on getting away from the city and a chance at his dream. He forgot the most crucial detail, marrying a total stranger.



* * *

Arabella paced, waiting for the stage to arrive. Clenching and unclenching her clammy hands as butterflies took root in the pit of her stomach. Her head jerked up at the sound of harnesses jingling. As the stagecoach bounced down the street towards her, Arabella squinted to get a better look. She forced a smile to her lips right as the stage rocked to a stop in front of her.

The driver climbed down to retrieve the baggage from the top of the coach as panic set in. Looking around as she thought about

making a hasty departure, the stagecoach door swung open. A tall man with blonde curls sticking from underneath his cowboy hat and striking sky-blue eyes exited the rig. My, but he was handsome! His eyes locked on Arabella as a wide smile spread across a chiseled face with a blonde mustache. "Are you Arabella SIRRINE?"

With a mouth as dry as cotton, Arabella croaked out. "I am."

Grant tipped his hat. "I'm Grant Parker."

Licking her dry lips as she pressed her hands to her middle, "Mr. Parker, are you planning on a stay at the hotel until we can get better acquainted?" She asked.

"Yes, but please call me Grant. After all, we will be courting." He replied.

Grant rubbed the back of his neck as he looked down.

"Sir, your bags." The coach driver set them down at Grant's feet.

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a coin and placed it in the driver's hand. "Thank you."

Arabella studied Grant as he took care of his belongings. His shirt strained against his muscles with every move. His physique showed he was fit and could work a farm as easily as any other man. Turning, Grant locked eyes with her. He had caught her staring. A cocky smile spread across his face as he bent to pick up his bags. With a wink, he dared to ask. "Care to show me to the hotel?"

Arabella blushed and, without a word, pivoted toward her wagon. Her hurried steps carried her further away from Grant. He had better pick up his stride if he was going to keep up with her. The arrogant man thought she was admiring him, well, maybe a little, but he didn't know she looked at him as a workhorse.

Biting back a wince as a sharp pain shot through his knee, Grant gritted out. "You sure are a fast little thing. Do you mind slowing down some?"

Stopping so fast that Grant had little time to slow down, he stumbled around to keep from running into the back of her, dropping his bags. A satisfying smile spread across Arabella's face as she looked down and batted her eyes. "Do you need help with those bags?"

With a huff, Grant hefted the bags up to his shoulder. "No, but if you could slow down a bit, that would help. The bags are cumbersome to carry, and with you stopping, it just made it worse."

Standing with her hands on her hips, Arabella tapped her boot, a

smirk on her lips. Picking up the other bags, now marginally soiled with mud, Grant frowned at the feisty woman standing before him. Arabella turned with a swish of skirts and kept a steady pace to the buckboard.

Grant reached the wagon right on the heels of Arabella, hoisting his bags in the bed. Holding out his hand, he went to assist her up into the buckboard when she huffed, climbing up unassisted, catching her hem on the sideboard. Balancing herself as she tugged her skirt lose, Grant chuckled. "Stubborn women."

Lifting her chin, she settled herself on the seat, taking up the reins. "Well, are you getting in, or are you going to walk?"

Grant offered a bemused smile as he climbed up beside her, where she slapped the reins with a flick of her wrist, causing the horses to jerk forward, throwing Grant down in the seat.



* * *

"Good day Mr. Foster." Arabella stepped up to the front desk. Struggling through the door with his bags, Grant dropped them to the floor at her feet. "Mr. Baker here needs a room." She smiled.

"Parker, Grant Parker," Grant growled as he took the key.

Arabella looked up from beneath her long eyelashes with a smirk on her pretty pink lips. What a little spitfire she was when riled. Her long black locks hung down her back nearly to her tiny waist, and with every move, the whiff of roses drifted his way. Oh, he had seen lots of beautiful women during his career, but she was stunning. He was going to have his hands full with this one. Grant was up for the challenge if she wanted to play games. He was stepping up to bat, and she wouldn't be ready for this play. "I guess we should meet tomorrow to talk about things?" Grant fingered the key in his hand as a broad smile slowly spread across his face.

Arabella smiled. "I'll give you time to sleep off your travels. How about I meet you here at noon?"

Grant took a step toward her. "That sounds good to me." Pulling her to him, he planted a kiss on her perfect lips before retreating up

the stairs.



* * *

Blinking, Arabella touched her lips. Looking around, she noticed several people staring at what had just taken place. Dropping her hands to her side, she felt as if she might swoon. She wrapped her arm around her middle, pressing the fingers of the other hand against her forehead. Grant didn't understand the consequences of that kiss. She knew he only did it to get back at her, but word would spread like wildfire in this town. Pastor Collins would knock at her door, demanding they marry and as quickly as possible. It was all her fault, too. She goaded him on with her temper. She shook her head with a weighted conscience and headed home to start dinner before Anthony returned from school. Stepping out into the busy street, she made her way to the wagon when Penelope Purcell called out. "Arabella? I thought that was you. Did you remarry? I saw that handsome young man you shared a scandalous moment with."

Arabella opened her mouth but then clamped her jaws shut as a blush spread across her face. "We are, I mean, uh, we are to be married soon. Excuse me, but I really must be on my way." Climbing up into the wagon, mindful of her hem, she grasped the reins, giving them a flick rolling away before Penelope commented further. What a mess Grant had made. His arrogant citified ways with women may not cause a stir in a big city, but here in Last Chance, it would ruin her reputation. Penelope would make sure the entire town knew about it before evening. Arabella's temper flared as she drove the wagon recklessly home, mumbling under her breath the whole way.

Reaching her homestead, she unhitched the horses, leading them to the barn. Arabella pushed her worries to the back of her mind and threw herself into her chores. Mindful that her son should be home any minute.

Anthony rushed through the door in a flurry of activity as he

threw his books on the table, plopping down with excitement. "Whoa, slow down, buddy, what's got you so excited?" Arabella leaned her hip against the table as she wiped her hands on her apron.

Anthony's crooked smile lit up his face as he waved a paper announcing that he got picked to participate in the spelling bee at school. Arabella ruffled his dark hair as she read the note. "I'm so proud of you, young man."

Anthony flipped open a book in front of him. "I've got to study. I'll do my chores before supper, Ma."

Arabella smiled. "See to it. Don't forget. Supper will be ready in an hour."

Anthony finished his studies while Arabella fixed supper. Hurrying through his chores before dinner was on the table, Anthony fed the horses and had yet to care for the cow. He petted Fancy, their milk cow, as he shuffled his feet through the hay. "I'm sure glad you didn't die in the snowstorm, Fancy. It's a good thing I forgot to turn you out that day. If my pa didn't have to go hunting, he wouldn't have died. I miss him, and my mom cries at night. She doesn't think I hear her."

"Anthony. Time for dinner." Arabella poked her head around the barn door.

"Okay, Ma. I'll wash up and be right in." Anthony wrapped his arms around Fancy's neck before heading for the wash barrel.

Arabella and Anthony ate dinner and cleared the table. "I'll wash dishes if you would dry them for me." Arabella poured hot water from the stove into the washbasin and began shaving soap into it.

Anthony picked up a towel and waited for his ma to hand him a dish. "Do you miss pa?"

Plunging her hands into the hot water, she scrubbed on a plate. "Every day, son. As I'm sure, you must as well."

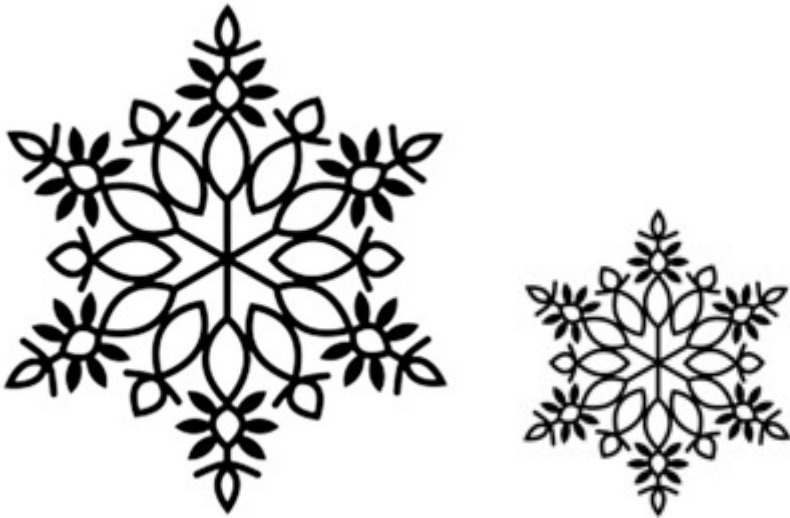
Anthony asked, "Will you get married and give me a new pa? I know the other kids' mas are getting married again." He dried the plate and placed it in the cupboard.

Arabella dried her hands on her apron and took hold of Anthony's shoulders. "Pastor Collins says we must marry again to stay here, that it's not safe without a husband. I can't entirely agree with him, but I can't work on the farm by myself either. So, the answer to your question is yes. How does that make you feel?"

Shrugging his shoulders, Anthony put the last dish away. "Well,

the other kids say they miss their pa, although their new ones are good to them and do lots of fun things with them. I guess it won't be so bad."

"I may have to marry soon, Anthony. I will always love your pa, but I need help to keep our farm so we can continue to live here. I wrote a letter like the rest of the ladies, and a gentleman by the name of Mr. Parker answered it, and he is staying at the hotel in town. He will never take your father's place, and I don't expect you to call him pa, but I want you to be kind and respect him." Arabella leaned down, placing a kiss on his head.



Whistling as he strolled down the boardwalk back to the hotel, Grant couldn't help but smooth his hand over the new shirt as he looked down at his fine cowboy boots. Now he felt as if he fit in better with the other men. As he watched Arabella pulling up in her wagon, Grant gave a big wave drawing attention to himself. Arabella took a deep breath and blew it out. Why did he have to have attention everywhere he went? He acted like a kid instead of a man.

At a steady pace, he reached the buckboard, noticing Arabella's rigid posture. "Did you miss me?" Grant chimed with a big grin.

"Please get in the wagon without making a scene." Arabella looked around to see if anyone was watching them.

Climbing onto the buckboard, Grant scooted as close to her as possible. "You're in a good mood today. I'll take it you missed me so much you didn't sleep last night."

"Ow," Grant placed his hand over his rib, rubbing where she just struck him. Arabella had elbowed him in his ribs as she took up the reins. "What did you do that for?"

With a flick of her wrist, she set the horses in motion, leading them out of town. Grant grabbed for his hat to keep it on his head as they raced down the road. Chuckling to himself, he knew he had gotten under her skin and was enjoying the display of emotion.

Arms behind his head, he leaned back as he took in the surrounding scenery, glancing over at Arabella occasionally. She was not happy with him at all. He couldn't help but think she couldn't look prettier with her puckered lips and hair flying in the breeze. Her flushed face gave a rosy glow as the light breeze settled around the moving wagon. She drew him to her in a way no other woman ever did. Arabella didn't fawn all over him as other women had; instead, she kept her distance, not caring what he thought.

As they pulled up to a house built of timber with a long porch, Grant noticed how cozy it looked as two rockers took up residence on the veranda. Flowers grew along the front of the house, with a garden off to the side. A newer barn stood erect across the yard and further back. An open field looked quite expansive and possibly had grown crops at one time.

Arabella stopped the wagon beside the barn. She forcefully set the brake. Without waiting on Grant, she climbed down from the wagon, nostrils flaring. Grant jumped down and circled to stand in front of her. Stopping short of him, with her fists to her side, she huffed out. "You... you... fool!" Stomping around him, she called over her shoulder, "You can unhitch the team." She made her way into the house and slammed the door.

Grant frowned as he scrubbed his hand over his face. Maybe he took things a little too far. Arabella sure was mad, and she didn't even fight back with her witty humor. Unhitching the horses, he slinked off with them in tow to the barn.



* * *

Arabella sat sagging forward on the settee, with her face in the palm of her hands. Her shoulders shook as the pent-up emotions released. Grant stood in the door, a wrinkle creasing his forehead as

he shifted from foot to foot. Wiping the tears from her eyes, Arabella looked up to see Grant standing with slumped shoulders. "Haven't you seen a woman cry before?" she pushed herself from the settee.

He rubbed the back of his neck as he locked eyes with Arabella. "I'm sorry for my behavior, and I didn't mean to upset you."

"I'm afraid it's as much my fault as it is yours." With skirts swishing, she made her way into the kitchen, removing two cups from the cupboard. "Please sit, and I'll make us a cup of tea." Throwing wood on the stove, she set a kettle of water on to boil.

"We need to talk about what happened at the hotel." Arabella poured the hot water over the tea leaves to let them steep. "What you don't understand is that by you kissing me in front of everyone, not only did it cause harm to my reputation since we have not married, but Penelope Purcell witnessed it."

Grant situated himself in his chair. "Who is Penelope Purcell?"

Draining the leaves, Arabella poured each of them a cup of tea. "She is one of our local gossipmongers. So, what you did yesterday is now all over town, and once Pastor Collins gets wind of it, he will beat a path to my door demanding we marry right away."

Grant shrugged his shoulders. "So, we tell him, no, and it's that easy."

Sitting down hard in her chair, Arabella sighed. "You don't understand. When the men died in the snowstorm leaving just women, Pastor Collins demanded, we remarry or leave Last Chance."

Grant grimaced as he took a sip of tea. "So, is that why you placed that ad for a groom?"

Sitting the teacup down, Arabella looked down at her cup. "I have nowhere else to go. I loved my husband very much, and this has been so hard on me. But what choice do I have? I can't work on this farm by myself."

The jangle of harnesses and clomping of horse hooves pulled Arabella's attention to the yard. She rose to see who it was when a knock at the door beat her to it. Pastor Collins pushed his way into the house and past her. "Am I interrupting anything?" Pastor asked as he pulled out a chair sitting down with crossed legs.

Grant leaned across the table and offered a hand. "I'm Grant Parker."

With a guarded smile, Pastor Collins shook Grant's hand. "You

must be the new groom, and I've heard some talk in town that you and Mrs. Sirrine are getting married."

Grant looked at Arabella, who stood with her hands on her hips and a tightness in her eyes. "Uh, we have been talking about it and spending some time to get to know one another," Grant said as he leaned back, rubbing his palms down his thighs.

Pastor Collins locked his fingers over his knee. "From what I hear, you both know each other well, despite being unmarried. Kissing in a public place gives one pause about your character, young man. You placed Arabella's reputation at stake, and to properly correct it now, you must marry and quickly.

Biting at her nail, Arabella paced back and forth. With a pained expression on his face, Grant stood, making his way to Arabella. Taking her hand, he squeezed it. "Actually, Pastor Collins, I was trying to build up the courage to ask her right before you pushed your way into the house."

A startled look consumed Arabella's face as she leaned against Grant. Pastor Collins stood. "Well, no time like the present since I'm here. Let's get you two married so that I can be on my way."



* * *

Arabella took Grant to gather his things at the hotel and back home to start supper. After dropping his bags on the bedroom floor, Grant made his way out of the house to put the horses up, giving Arabella enough time to collect herself over the events of the day. The door frame cut into her shoulder as she leaned against it. Grant was a handsome man, but she wasn't in love with him like she had been with Luca. Hopefully, in time, they could come to like each other and hopefully someday fall in love. Rubbing her hand up and down her arm, Arabella stood in a daze. She couldn't wrap her head around being married to a total stranger. They hadn't had time to talk about the farm or anything else. She knew nothing about him, nor did he know anything about her.

Arabella felt her legs give way as she slid down the length of the

door frame. Laying her hand upon her chest, she felt as if she was suffocating. Squeezing her eyes shut at seeing Grant's bags sitting on the floor, she asked God to help her. Her eyes popped open as a sudden thought worked itself into her mind. They would share the same bed tonight, and she wasn't ready to be his wife in that way, at least not yet. Surely Grant would understand and agree to sleep elsewhere than on the bed with her for now.

The clock on the mantle struck three o'clock, Arabella drug herself off the floor. She needed to see about getting supper ready, Anthony would be home from school at any minute.

As if thinking of her son conjured him up, Anthony rushed into the house, letting the door bang behind him. "Ma!"

Placing her hand over her heart, Arabella gasped. "Anthony, you scared me half to death."

Anthony hung his head. "Sorry, Ma."

"It's okay. You just startled me, is all." Arabella placed her hand on his shoulder and lifted his chin with a finger.

A bright smile spread across her face. "Now, what did you need to tell me?"

With an upturned face, Anthony beamed. "I won the spelling bee!"

Arabella's hands flew to her chest. "Oh my. I'm so proud of you, son."

Anthony pulled a blue ribbon from his pocket with a sparkle in his eyes, thrusting it in front of Arabella's face. "I even got a ribbon for it."

Laughing, she hugged her son. "I think this is cause for a special dessert after supper. How about I bake a cake?"

Tightening his hug, Anthony kissed his mother on the cheek. "I love cake."

A clearing of a throat broke into the special moment between mother and son. Gripping Anthony's shoulder, Arabella looked at Grant. "You two haven't met yet. Grant, this is my son Anthony."

"Nice to meet you, Anthony." Grant stepped forward, offering his hand.

Thrusting out his hand, Anthony grasped Grant's hand with a vigorous shake. "I won a ribbon today."

A warm smile spread across Grant's face. "A ribbon? How did you win that?"

Waving the ribbon at him, Anthony exclaimed. "I won the

spelling bee at school."

"Well, I'll be. That's quite an award. You must be smart." Grant gazed at the ribbon, then back to the young boy.

Anthony looked up at Grant with eyebrows drawn together and tilted head. "Are you going to marry my ma?"

Choking back a laugh with a cough, Grant covered his smile behind his hand. "Anthony, you are a bright young man, and yes, Pastor Collins married your mother and me today. I'm going to help her around the farm, and I promise to be good to you and your mother."

With a shrug of his shoulder, Anthony replied, "Okay. My friends all got new pas, so I guess it's okay for me too."

Grant rested his hand on Anthony's shoulder. "Have you ever heard of baseball?"

Anthony replied with a big grin. "I know it's a game, but I don't know how to play."

"Well, how would you like to learn? I played baseball when I lived in Chicago, and I can teach you and your friends."

Anthony's face lit up. "Ma, can he?" Anthony turned hopeful eyes on Arabella.

"Once you finish your studies and your chores, I don't mind." Arabella's watery eyes locked on Grant.

Anthony threw his arms around Arabella's middle. "Thank you, Ma."

Anthony raced out the door as fast as his little legs could carry him, letting the door bang behind him. Letting out a huge breath, Grant plopped down in a chair. "Well, that went better than I thought it would."

"Thank you." Arabella's voice was thick with emotion as she teared up. "I was afraid this would be so hard on him, but he seemed to accept it. Thank you for being kind."

Grant stood, placing a hand on Arabella's shoulder. "I meant what I said about being good to you and your son." With that, he squeezed her shoulder and made his way outside, leaving Arabella alone with her thoughts.



Sitting back in his chair, Grant placed his hand on his stomach. "That was a fine meal. You sure are a wonderful cook."

With a mouth full of cake, Anthony mumbled out. "My mom makes the best cakes too."

"Anthony do not talk with your mouth full," Arabella said, beginning to clear the table with a satisfied smile.

She was happy to make a meal for someone who appreciated her cooking. Pouring water from the stove into the wash pan, Grant stepped beside her and picked up the dishrag. "What are you doing?" Arabella frowned.

"What's it look like? I'm doing the dishes. I think someone is ready for bed." Grant nodded over his shoulder at a sleepy little boy with heavy eyelids.

Helping Anthony up from the table, she pulled out his nightclothes, getting him changed, and tucked him into bed with a kiss as she pulled the covers up over him. With one last look at her sleeping son, she extinguished the lamp and tiptoed from the room.

Arabella's eyes roamed over the clean kitchen as she spotted

Grant folding a hand towel over the washbasin. A yawn broke from her as she quickly covered her hand over her mouth. Chuckling, Grant leaned back against the counter with his arms crossed in front of him. "Looks like someone else is ready for bed."

Arabella's half-closed eyes blinked long. "I'm afraid the day's events wore me out. We need to talk about the sleeping arrangements." She looked down at her feet as a blush took over her face.

Grant cleared his throat. "I, uh, expect sleeping arrangements to be awkward at first, we need to get to know each other better, but you have nothing to worry about."

Arabella let out a pent-up breath. "I agree. The matter of where you are going to sleep is a problem, though. I want to keep things as normal as possible for Anthony. His father and I slept in the same bed, and he would expect that. He always knocks before entering, so if you slept on the floor, he would never know." She said.

With furrowed eyebrows, Grant licked his lips. "Arabella, I'm not trying to be difficult, but I can't sleep on the floor."

"Why not?" Arabella asked. She placed her fist upon her slender hips.

"Because I hurt my knee while playing ball. It's the whole reason I don't play anymore and decided to come here in the first place. If I sleep on the floor, I'll be limping around for days." Grant smacked his hand against his thigh as he looked her straight in the eyes.

Glaring at him, Arabella huffed. "You never told me that when you wrote to me."

"Oh, what did you want me to say? By the way, I have a bum knee and can't sleep on the floor." Grant shook his head with a sarcastic laugh.

"You're funny," she frowned. "I told you I owned a farm. Didn't you think I needed to know about your knee before we married? How are you going to plant corn with a bad knee?" Arabella motioned to the door with her hand. "That's why I needed to get married because I can't do it by myself."

Rubbing a hand over his face, Grant looked up with pleading eyes. "I planned on opening a leather shop once I got here. I've always wanted to make things with leather since I was a boy, and I'm good at it too."

"Oh, I get it. You thought you would come here, and I would have the money to buy you a shop." She huffed. Arabella's face

went hot as she stormed across the room to where he stood.

Shaking his head with a snort, Grant looked down at her. "You are so full of yourself. I have money I tucked away and planned on using that. But you're so busy being self-righteous you didn't even ask." Stomping across the room, Grant retrieved his bags from the bedroom and stomped across the parlor and out the front door, slamming it behind him.



* * *

Kicking at a clump of grass, Grant seethed as he marched to the barn. "What an infuriating woman," he muttered out loud. Upon entering the barn, he threw his bags on the ground with a wide stance. Lighting a lantern that hung on the peg by the doors, Grant blew out a deep breath. He began bunching up straw to make a bed or as comfortable as one could make on straw. Thank goodness he had brought a few blankets from his bed back in Chicago. He would need them tonight.

Flopping down on the straw, he wiggled around, trying to get comfortable, finally settling down with arms behind his head. Scratchy pricks of the straw poked him in the back as he let out a sigh. Why did he think coming here was a good idea? Because just once, he hoped his dreams could come to fruition instead of always going wrong. His ma had always told him that Jesus would listen if he would talk. How long had he neglected his father? Long enough, *Lord, I know I have given you no reason to listen to me, but I need your help. I've certainly made a mess of things here. If you can help me out, I promise to spend more time in your presence. Please give me direction instead of me always running ahead of you. I want a joy-filled life for once. Baseball was the one thing I was good at, but I had to let go of that, and I pray it's because you have something better for me. Amen.*

Peace flowed over him as he turned on his side and fell into a heavy slumber.

The rising sun shot a rosy hue across the land as a rooster crowed, startling Grant awake. Grant's thoughts focused on where

and why he was lying in a barn as he looked around. Sitting up with a moan, he stretched as a yawn broke free. Today was a new day, and he would give his all at getting along with the little vixen he married. Shaking out his blankets, he folded them, placing them back into his bag.

Striding to the door, pulling it open, he found the water barrel. Splashing his face with the chilly water as a shiver raced down his back, now fully awake and the sleep washed from his eyes, Grant was ready to face the day and its challenges. The smell of bacon drifted from the house, causing his stomach to rumble. What if he took in a peace offering? Would they start the day off without fighting with each other? Heading back into the barn, Grant changed into clean clothes and grabbed a stool to milk Fancy and then gather eggs.



* * *

Arabella staggered into the kitchen with dark circles showing under her eyes. She hadn't slept a wink last night after her fight with Grant. Her mind kept going over how she had treated him and the horrible things she had said. An apology would be forthcoming this morning. They had yet to solve the problem of where he would sleep, and with his knee, she couldn't expect him to sleep on the floor.

With a sigh, Arabella could only think of one solution: for him to sleep in the barn. He would be comfortable out there, and she would just have to find an explanation if Anthony asked. Starting the stove with the small amount of wood that sat nearby, she put the filled coffee pot to boil. Stifling a yawn, Arabella carried her tired body down to the root cellar to retrieve bacon and peach jam. By the time she returned to the kitchen, the stove was going, and the pot of water was warming. Arabella unwrapped the bacon from the muslin sack, her thoughts once again straying to Grant.

With the click of the front door interrupting her thoughts, she focused her attention on what she was doing. Spinning around to

the bacon that was frying, she tried to keep a smile from breaking loose. Grant cleared his throat upon entering the kitchen with a pail of milk in one hand and eggs in his upturned cowboy hat in the other. Placing the milk on the table, he made his way over to Arabella, fisting an egg. "Where would you like me to put these?"

With a shuffle of skirts, she gathered a bowl from a shelf, placing it on the counter. "If you will put them in here, I'll fry them up for breakfast. Thank you for retrieving them for me."

A hiccup from the side of the kitchen pulled Grant's attention away from her as Anthony shuffled into the room. He rubbed at his eyes with closed fists. Tufts of dark hair stuck up on the side of his head as he looked up at Grant with his large brown eyes. "Morning, Mr. Parker."

"Good morning, Anthony. Why don't you call me Grant? I like the sound of that much more since we are to be friends." Grant's heart softened at the sight of the little boy that reminded him so much of himself at that age.

Grant placed the eggs into the bowl before picking up his hat and firmly putting it on his head. A smile spread across Anthony's face as he raced to the door, slipping his feet into his boots. "Mr.... I mean, Grant, would you like me to show you how to feed Fancy and the horses."

"I would like that very much, Anthony. After all, it's been a long time since I've had to do that." Grant shoved his hands in his pockets as he followed Anthony to the barn while the little boy chatted away.

Arabella placed her hand to her middle at the flip her stomach did. Slowly shaking her head with closed eyes, she wondered how she could be so stubborn. Grant infuriated her one minute, and the next would melt her heart with his admiration of her son? He had even brought in eggs and milked the cow after everything she had said to him last night. She needed to ask his forgiveness and learn to control her temper. The situation of having to marry so soon after losing Luca was turning her into a bitter woman. It wasn't Grant's fault, and he was looking for the same things she was. A chance to start over after a loss.



* * *

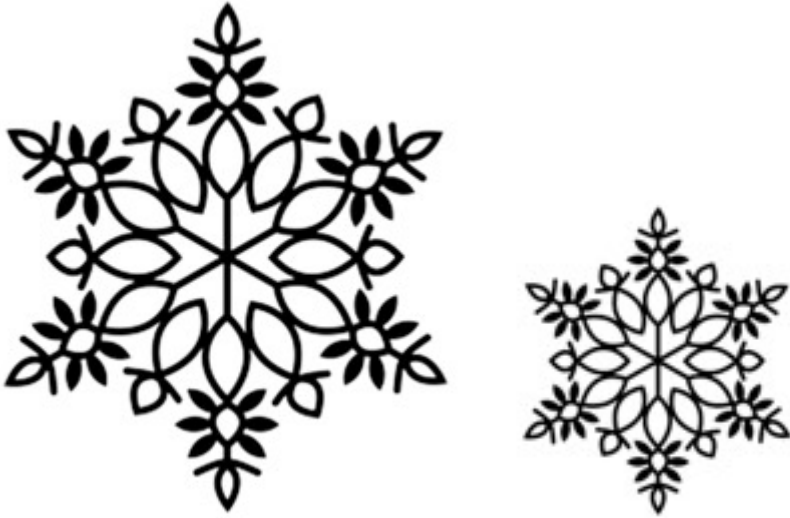
Grant laughed as Anthony told him how Fancy likes someone to sing to her. As if to prove it, he belted out "*It Is Well With My Soul*" Fancy laid down with a sound moo. Shaking his head, Grant thought the cow acted more like a pet than a milk cow, and she even followed the little dark-headed boy around everywhere he went. With a twinkle in his eye, Grant decided he would go into town and have the mercantile owner order a baseball and bat. While he waited on the ball, he would make Anthony a pair of baseball gloves. Grant brushed at the dust on his pant leg when his stomach grumbled, causing Anthony to laugh. "Ma will have breakfast on, and your stomach sounds like it's hungry."

Grant chuckled. "It does at that. Let's get cleaned up."

Both washed up before entering the house, where they found the table set and Arabella pouring a cup of milk for Anthony. Grant pulled out a chair and motioned for Arabella to have a seat. "I've got to get the coffee off the stove." She turned as Grant's hand shot out to stop her.

"Have a seat and let me get the coffee." Grant pushed her chair forward as she sat down. Picking up a hand towel, he wrapped it around his hand before reaching for the hot pot.

Pouring a cup for Arabella and then himself, he sat the pot down before returning to the table and taking a seat. Grant reached out his hand to a hesitant Arabella as he bowed his head and said grace.



The gentle breeze blew across Arabella's face as she sat with fingers gripping the side of the wagon. Grant took in the surrounding land. Prairie phlox grew wild among the tall grass that surrounded them. It was so freeing not to live in the confines of a crowded city any longer. One would never tire of seeing the wide-open land. Blue skies seemed to become one with the prairie as the wagon bumped along the rutted road. "It's a beautiful day." Grant said while glancing at Arabella, Grant allowed the horses to plod along at a slower pace.

The bouncing of the wagon made it hard for Arabella to tie her bonnet on, so settling with just placing it on her head, she sighed. "I suppose it is at that." Arabella still stewed over the fact that Grant hadn't told her about his knee. She could do nothing about it now since they were married. With his injured knee, she knew it would be too much for him to work the land.

Instead, Arabella focused on making this relationship work. Grant had to go to the bank and have money wired from Chicago to Last Chance. Hopefully, he had enough for him to open a leather

shop. Luca would turn over in his grave if he knew the land was sitting without producing.

The wagon jerked to a stop in front of the bank. Arabella allowed Grant to help her down. With fidgeting hands, she tied her bonnet, shaking out the dust from her skirts as she walked into the bank with Grant. The teller greeted them both. Grant told the man his business and kept Arabella next to him. "I want no more secrets between us. I want you to have access to my money anytime you need it. Since we are now married, we should both have a say in how we spend it." Withdrawing a couple of dollars, Grant handed Arabella some coin.

"Why are you giving me this?" Tilting her head to the side with drawn eyebrows, Arabella looked up at her husband.

Offering Arabella his arm as they exited the bank, Grant pulled her to face him. "I want you to go to the mercantile and order a ball and bat for Anthony. While you are there, buy anything you need, including a new dress." Grant turned her loose. "I'm going to look for a place to set up our shop. I will meet you at the diner for lunch in an hour." Climbing up in the wagon, Grant set the horses into motion.

Arabella waved the dust from in front of her as the wagon wheels stirred it up in its wake. Jangling the coins in her hands, she dropped them in her reticule and made her way down the street to the mercantile. Numb from the turn of events, Arabella's mind went to Grant. He had been trying to please her since the night of their fight. Not only was he handsome, but his patience and kind words for Anthony showed he had a big heart. So why was she fighting with him at every turn? Stepping up onto the boardwalk, Arabella spotted Faith walking toward her. "Morning, Faith." Arabella stood with her hand on the door handle of the mercantile.

Faith flashed her a bright smile as her boots clicked against the dirty planks of the walkway. "Good morning. How are things going?"

Turning loose of the door handle, Arabella stepped up to Faith with a hug. "As well as expected now that Pastor Collins forced me to marry Grant."

Faith slammed her fist to her hips with a shake of her head. "That infuriating man."

"Well, in all fairness, it was Grant's fault." Arabella looked around to see if anyone was listening before continuing. "We had a

little spat before I showed him to the hotel, so he kissed me in the lobby to get back at me, and Penelope Purcell saw."

Faith's hand flew to her mouth to stifle a smile. "That was sure to cause a stir."

"It did, and I'm afraid I have met someone with a temper and as stubborn as myself. It's been trying, especially when I found out Grant has a bad knee and can't work the farm." Arabella fingered the trim on her sleeve.

"What will you do now?" Faith asked with raised eyebrows.

"He is going to open a leather shop. Having saved money when he played baseball in case of hard times, he should have the funds to do it. I'm sure things will work out." She gave a shake of her head as if clearing her mind.

Faith rested her hand on Arabella's arm. "I'll be praying for you both.

Arabella blinked back her tears. "Thank you."



* * *

Grant had found a shop that would work for what he needed. He used most of his savings and signed the paperwork. Grant made his way to the diner with the deed to the leather shop securely in his pocket with a confident stride.

Securing the wagon, Grant stepped around horse dung as he made his way up on the boardwalk. The smell of fresh bread and roasting meat met him as he pulled open the door to the diner. As his eyes adjusted to the room, he spotted his pretty wife seated at a corner table. Arabella sat drinking a glass of water, staring out the window. She looked beautiful in her deep blue dress and hair in a chignon with stray strands framing her soft pink cheeks.

Grant wanted to pull the pins from her dark hair and let the long strands tumble down over her shoulders. If they were to get past their differences, perhaps they would have a good marriage. Striding to the table, Grant seated himself with a smile as Arabella locked eyes with him.

"Did you find yourself a lovely dress at the mercantile?" Grant leaned back in his chair with a hand in his pocket wrapped around the deed.

Arabella grinned. "I bought some coffee and a few other things I needed, like flour and sugar." Looking down at her hands, she rubbed at her fingers.

"I wanted you to buy yourself a new dress. Were you able to order that ball and bat for Anthony?" Grant placed his hand over hers to stop her from fidgeting.

"I ordered the ball and bat." Arabella slipped her hand out from beneath his as the waitress stepped up to take their orders. Already he missed the warmth and comfort that her hand gave?

"Well, it's official, we have ourselves a new business." Giving the waitress their orders, Grant pulled the deed from his pocket as he laid the paper in front of Arabella with a proud smile on his face.

Arabella stared at the paper, then up to Grant with a defeated look. "So, when do you plan to open?"

Grant took the piece of paper and placed it back in his pocket. His rough hand still clutching the stiff paper. "We need to come up with a name, and I still have to make items to sell and find a tanner to talk with about getting leather. I'm hoping it won't take long, maybe a couple of weeks."



* * *

Two weeks later,

Arabella had seen very little of Grant with him working on getting the leather shop up and running. Anthony didn't question why he remained sleeping out in the barn, but Arabella longed for companionship more than before. She thought that with him keeping his distance, it would make her happy. Punching the bread down, she placed it in a pan, covering it with a towel. Wiping the flour from her hands on her apron, Arabella poured herself a cup of tea.

Standing against the counter, one arm across her middle, she

sipped her tea while staring out the window. Grant stood at the wash barrel shirtless. With his head bent forward, he poured water over his hair, letting it run down his face. He pulled a towel from his back pocket and wiped his face as muscles rippled along his chest and arms. While combing his fingers through his blonde locks, water dripped down his biceps. Without looking up, he rubbed the towel at the back of his neck, only intensifying what a fine figure of a man he was.

Arabella swallowed, fingering the neckline of her dress as she stood watching Grant. It may be the warm tea, but suddenly it felt sweltering in the house. Grant's gaze swung to the window as Arabella stumbled to the side so he couldn't see her. The curtain swayed in the breeze as her shoulders bumped against the wall. A blush rose to her face as she bit at the tip of her finger. Maybe it was time to put the past behind her and try to become a family. If only guilt didn't pull at her every time that thought crossed her mind. Her gaze followed Grant back into the barn.

With nimble fingers, she untied and removed her apron. She smoothed out her skirts and pinched her cheeks after patting her hair into place. With a pause, she pushed open the front door. Arabella cleared her throat as she made her way across the yard. She tried to keep from looking at the unworked fields or letting the guilt from seeing them, pull her back to the house as she slid into the barn.

Grant, now wearing a clean shirt, sat perched on a stool bent over an old table. The smell of hay and manure rose to greet Arabella as she suppressed a sneeze. Grant peered over his shoulder, placing what he was working with down on the table. "Is it time for lunch already?" Grant rubbed his eyes and stood, stretching with his hands on his lower back.

"No, I just thought I would get some fresh air for a bit and see what you were doing." Arabella stood with her hands behind her back as she toed at the straw beneath her feet.

"My leg grows stiff from sitting so long," he smiled. Grant rubbed at his knee as he put weight on it. "I'm working on some pieces to sell when the store opens next week." Pride was apparent on his face as he picked up what he had been doing. He ran his hand over the soft leather before handing it over to Arabella. "You're holding an ammo bag that I've only started."

"It's lovely," she replied, looking at the design and running her

fingers over its smoothness. "How did you learn to do all this?" Handing it back to him, she peered over his shoulder at the tools he was using.

Stepping aside, so Arabella had a better look, he picked up a mallet, lightly tapping it against his palm. "It was my grandfather's trade. I spent so much time with him as a young boy that he would let me work on scraps. He taught me how to hold the tools and create. Before long, my work was good enough to sell along with his."

"Why did you play baseball instead of doing this, then?" Her finger traced the tool she picked up, and she turned it over to get a better look.

"My father had a very different view on work than my grandfather. If you weren't exerting yourself physically, then it wasn't considered real work. So, the only way to escape my father's overbearing demands was to play baseball for the National Baseball League. It was the only way I could leave our farm and my father's controlling ways. My grandfather was gone by then, so I took all his tools, packed my things, and headed for Chicago."

Grant took Arabella by the hand, leading her over to a blanket lying over a wide crate. He pulled the blanket off the bin, revealing a beautiful saddle, a few more bags, and a couple of gun holsters.

Arabella gasped as she kneeled beside the crate. Hay stuck to her skirt and cut into her shins. "These are exquisite," she exclaimed. A blanket lined the box, and each piece sat cradled in cloth, ready to be placed on shelves for customers. Looking up at Grant with glistening eyes, "May I touch?"

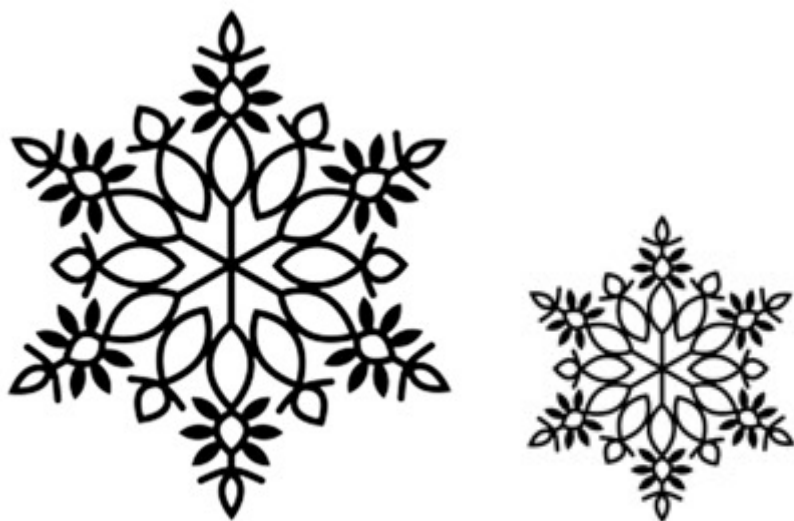
Grant's smile lit up his face as his chest puffed out. "Go right ahead. I still have to polish them before I put them on display."

Her fingers wrapped around the edge of the crate as she leaned in, running her other hand over the saddle and other items. Blinking back tears at such beautiful things, Arabella swallowed the lump forming in her throat. She had tried to hold him back from his true calling in life. Her rude remarks and selfish ways had made his time here miserable, but he took it all in stride and had been kind to her and Anthony.

"I should never have doubted you. Your talent is remarkable. I'm sorry for my behavior all this time." Arabella's soft voice quivered. Pushing herself from the ground as she shook the straw from her skirt, she fled from the barn before the unshed tears fell down her

face.

"Arabella!" Grant turned and hollered after her, but she had already disappeared into the house. He ran his hand down his face as he kicked at the barn door. Women, he would never understand them.



Today was the day he would open shop. His stomach felt queasy as he finished his chores. Grant mucked the stalls, giving Fancy and the horses fresh water and straw as a merry tune carried across the yard and the barn door pushed open. Anthony stood with a milk pail in hand as his eyes found Grant. "You look like you're not feeling well." Anthony grabbed the three-legged stool sitting on it at Fancy's side.

Grant patted Fancy's rump as Anthony milked her. "I guess I'm a little nervous about opening our shop today."

Anthony, with a steady rhythm of squeeze and pull, began filling the pail as Fancy settled. "All the kids at school talk about how excited their fathers are that you're opening a leather shop here, and I heard one of the older boys say he was saving up for a new saddle."

Grant ruffled Anthony's thick hair. "Thank you for reassuring me. Oh, before I forget, I have something for you."

With wide eyes, Anthony jerked his head up. "You do?"

Anthony chuckled. "Finish up milking, Fancy, and I'll give it to

you."

Ten minutes later, Anthony sat the pail of milk on the kitchen table covered with a cloth. He couldn't stop fidgeting as Grant walked into the room with his hands behind his back.

Arabella stood with her fingers wrapped around the back of a kitchen chair. "What's going on?"

Anthony bounced from foot to foot with a smile that lit up his round face. "Grant has something for me."

The wide grin on Grant's face made Arabella's stomach do a little flip-flop at the excitement that flicked across his face. Anthony and Grant were bonding, and her respect grew for the handsome man who was her husband.

Grant removed his hands from his back and presented Anthony with two leather fingerless gloves, a bat, and a ball. Anthony let loose a whoop and threw his arms around Grant's middle. "Thank you. I'm going to be the most liked boy at school." He beamed up at Anthony.

Grant's eyes glistened as he hugged the little boy back. "It took me a little longer than I wanted, but I got them done."

With gigantic eyes, Anthony asked. "You made these?"

Grant took the ball and threw it back and forth from hand to hand. "I made the gloves, but your ma ordered the bat and ball."

Anthony hugged Arabella. "Thank you, Ma," he said into her skirts.

Grant squeezed Anthony's shoulder. "But for now, you better get to school. If you get your chores done and your studies, maybe we can play catch tonight. I'll collect the eggs for you, now scoot, young man."

Grant's heart squeezed as he watched Anthony gather his lunch pail and run out the door. "He's quite the young man."

Arabella began clearing the breakfast dishes as her thumb found the remnants of the sticky jelly from a plate. "You're going to have him spoiled at the rate you're going, but yes, he is."

Grant picked up a hand towel to dry the dishes Arabella was now washing with a throaty chuckle. "He is a good boy, and he needs some fun in his life. Besides, it gives Anthony and I something to do together." Sitting the last dish on a shelf, Grant laid the towel over the pump to dry.

He reached over and grabbed Arabella by the hand and twirled her around. "You better go get ready so that we can open our store

today, we don't want to be late."

"You want me there?" Arabella giggled as she came face to face with Grant.

Grant's breath quickened as his eyes caught hers. The need to pull her closer and taste her soft pink lips waged war in his mind. Instead, he tapped the end of her nose with his finger. "It is our store, silly. Why wouldn't I?"

Arabella quickly looked away, removing her apron to hang it on a peg. "I'll change promptly and fix my hair." She fled the room as fast as her feet would carry her.

Letting out a breath, Grant ran his hand through his hair. He was certain Arabella felt something too with the way she looked into his eyes, but then she had fled. After all, she had just buried a husband. He had to remember to take it slow with her.



* * *

Arabella held her breath as Grant's large hands wrapped around her waist, helping her from the wagon. She pulled her shoulders back and ran her hands down the front of her skirt before adjusting her hat. The sun's rays shone down on her, casting a shadow on the boardwalk as Arabella slipped her arm through Grant's. She spied the painted sign *Saddle Up Leathery* above the establishment as he led them to the front door, unlocking it before ushering her in. The smell of leather washed over her as shiny items lined shelves and hung from pegs. Off to the side stood a long wood counter where customers would pay for the things they purchased.

"It all looks amazing," Arabella said looking at each of the unique items polished to shine with intricate carvings. "Customers are going to fall in love with them."

Grant shoved his hands in the front pockets of his trousers with a lifted chin. Arabella noticed the pride that had settled over him as he followed her around the store. Just as Grant opened his mouth to say something, there was a knock on the large window. There stood several customers anxiously waiting for them to open. Arabella

looked at Grant with surprise on her face as they both laughed and made their way to the door to welcome their customers.

Leaning into Grant, Arabella whispered, "I can ring up the items if you want to talk to the customers."

"Are you sure you don't mind?" Grant leaned over the counter to retrieve a list. "Here are the prices for all the items. If you have questions, just ask."

With the day quickly ending as the hordes of customers dwindled, it surprised Arabella to find she had enjoyed helping out. Satisfaction at selling the beautiful leather items and helping people find what made them happy left her with a lighter heart. Having a store differed from the long, hot, tiresome days she put in with Luca in the fields to only cook supper and do other chores before falling into bed at night.

"A penny for your thoughts." Grant smiled. Counting the money and marking items in a ledger, Grant noticed Arabella staring at the front of the store with a broad smile on her face. He laid his pen inside the pages to save his place.

"I was just thinking about how much I enjoyed today. Much more than working in the fields." Arabella leaned forward with her elbows resting on the counter and head tilted up at Grant.

"You are welcome to work here with me anytime you want. I enjoyed our first day as well. In fact, why don't I show you how to do the ledger in case I need your help with it." Pushing the book between them, Grant showed her what to write on the pages after closing each day.

"That's all there is to it?" Arabella ran her fingers down the neatly filled in figures. "That was easy, and I can do this."

Closing the ledger and putting it under the counter, Grant held up a money bag. "You need to put the money in this bag, and it goes in a safe in the back. At the end of the week, I will take it to the bank. Oh, I wanted to show you the back room."

Arabella followed on his heels to a back room that had large tables with stools. "I can work back here making items if you want to work with the customers out front. I don't want to push you into working here if you have enough to do at home. I just want you to know I'm not against it either." Grant kneeled in front of a large safe, working the combination until it clicked, and the door swung open. Placing the money in it, he closed the safe and twisted the knob. Wincing as he struggled to get up, Arabella hurried to his

side, helping him to stand.

Grant's warm body pushed up against her side as she placed his arm over her shoulder. Her fingers tingled with the desire to touch the blond curls that laid against his neck from under his cowboy hat. Her mind told her to push him away, but the smell of leather and sandalwood that drifted from him made her want to lean into him even more. So why did it feel wrong to like this? He was her husband now. Quickly letting go of him, she cleared her throat and retreated into the other room.



* * *

Once Grant stood, Arabella quickly moved away. He knew the moment her body tensed. Things had been going so well between them all day until now. Was he ever going to break the wall down she had so quickly built around her heart? Grant followed her from the room with slumped shoulders as they closed the shop and rode back to the ranch in silence.

Pulling into the yard, Arabella climbed down from the wagon and hurried into the house as Grant unhitched the horses leading them into the barn. The harness dug into his fingers as his grip tightened around them. Without a care, he slammed them on the peg that hung from the wall. He leaned his arm against the wall as his head came to rest on top. Arabella was driving him mad. The woman didn't know just how beautiful she was and when she got all riled up, and her temper took over... Grant punched the wall, and blood ran down his hand as he welcomed the burning that followed. He was falling for the stubborn woman, but she wouldn't give him her heart, and he didn't know how much longer he could live like this?

Sunbeams spread across the barn floor with dust mites dancing in their spotlight. "Whatcha doin?" Anthony asked from where he stood in the doorway with his ball and bat in hand.

Grant quickly pushed around him, plunging his hand into the cool water in the rain barrel, wincing at the sting that ran across his

knuckles.

Anthony followed him outside. "How did you hurt your hand?"

Pulling a clean handkerchief from his trouser pocket, Grant tied it around his hand. "Uh, hanging up the harnesses, but it will be fine. It's just a little cut."

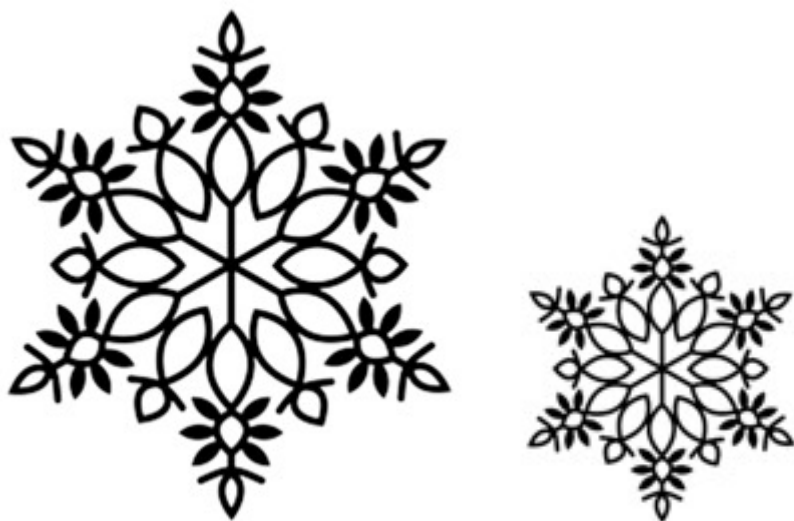
Anthony cocked his head to one side. "Can you still teach me to play ball?"

Grant smiled with a nod. "I wouldn't miss it for the world, buddy. Do you have your chores done?"

Anthony looked down as he kicked at a clod of grass. "I should finish them first, I guess."

Grant ruffled the boy's hair. "You get that done, and I'll finish my chores too, and then we can play until it's time for dinner."

Anthony sat his bat and ball against the barn wall while hurrying to get the horses and cow fed. He sang a jaunty tune as he scooped up oats to feed the horses. Grant shook his head with a smile. This sweet little boy already had his heart, and he wanted to be his father. To tuck him in at night, teach him about life, and give him all the love of an earthly father.



Arabella sat on the front porch darning socks, setting the rocker to rocking with the tip of her toe. The sun was dipping behind the trees as a whippoorwill announced its lonely existence. Grant threw the ball to Anthony, as he came short from catching it, he called out. "Anthony, you want to run to the ball."

Anthony bent with hands on his knees. "Throw it again, Grant. I'll catch it this time."

Tossing the ball, Anthony ran, getting under the ball, and this time caught it. Jumping up and down, he did a little dance at catching the ball. Arabella giggled, clapping her hands at her son's accomplishment.

"I'm going to keep tossing you the ball until you catch every one and can throw each one back to me right in my hand," Grant said as his fingers wrapped around the ball.

Anthony's furrowed brows and set jaw caused Arabella to smile. Her son had undoubtedly taken a shine to Grant, and she noticed a sparkle in Grant's eyes as he patiently taught the boy how to catch and throw the baseball.

Pain pierced her finger where the needle pricked her skin. With a sigh, she set the darning down. Lifting the inflicted appendage to her mouth, she felt something hit her foot. Looking up, Anthony and Grant stood with hands on their hips, staring at her.

"What? You never see someone stick their finger with a needle?" She looked from one to the other.

"Ma, we were waiting for you to throw back the ball." Anthony giggled.

"Oh, sorry." Arabella smiled as she picked up the ball, throwing it back to Grant.

"That's quite an arm you have. Why don't you get out here and throw a few with us?" Grant crossed his arms with a smirk.

Her feet stomped across the porch and down the steps as she marched past her son. "Okay, Mr. Smarty Pants, send it here."

Anthony put his hand to his mouth and chuckled at the look on Grant's face. He threw the ball to Arabella with a wink at Anthony, which quickly set Anthony to clapping. "Good job, Ma."

Arabella threw the ball to Anthony. When he caught the ball, he threw it to Grant. "I want to try hitting it with the bat." He said, running to stand in front of Grant.

Arabella walked to Anthony's side. "Why don't we save that for tomorrow night? It will be dark soon, and morning will come early."

Anthony looked down with slumped shoulders as he toed the grass. "Aw Ma, do we hafta?"

The sun had set the sky to a deep scarlet red, with orange streaks fanning out. Grant hadn't noticed how late it had become, they were having such a grand time. "I think we better listen to your mother."

"Okay, but promise tomorrow we will all play again." Anthony pulled on Grant's hand, leading him to the house.

Arabella followed the two into the house as she listened to Grant's reply. "Well, Anthony, while I would like to promise you, I don't know what tomorrow will bring. A man always keeps his word, so I don't want to make a promise I may not follow through with. If you get all your chores and schoolwork done and have time, we can play some more.

Anthony hugged Grant. "Okay, goodnight, Grant."

Arabella's heart swelled at the lesson Grant was teaching her son with such love and patience. Even Luca hadn't done that. He was

often short with Anthony or left that up to her. Anthony shuffled off to bed with her following behind as she tucked him into bed with plenty of hugs and kisses before blowing out the lamp.

Grant was sitting in the parlor reading the newspaper when Arabella wandered out of Anthony's room. The chair cushion sunk under Arabella's weight as she fidgeted to get comfortable. As her head rested back against the chair, she let out a sigh. Grant peered over the top of his paper. "Should I leave so you can turn in?"

Arabella was so comfortable with Grant reading the paper while she relaxed, she forgot they weren't a conventional couple. "No, I'm just relaxing. It's been a while since I've had another adult to help me with Anthony. You're very good with him."

Grant sat the paper aside. "My grandfather was my best friend growing up, and I guess everything he taught me has stuck. But that kid sure makes it easy to love him."

Arabella felt a little of her wall crumbling.



* * *

Two weeks flew by. Grant couldn't help but think how much he enjoyed his job. He was busy making leather goods, and Arabella attended the front counter when she had time to help. Like everything else, she gave her all to the store by keeping the store clean, leather polished, and the ledgers consistent. The people of Last Chance knew and respected her, giving him tremendous admiration for her.

Grant helped her with the dishes each night and fixed things around the farm, and they had fallen into a routine and would often play ball with Anthony in the evenings and on weekends. Arabella still hadn't let him get closer to her, but he knew he had made a chink in her armor.

Loud arguing from the front of the shop broke into his thoughts. Laying down his tools and pushing himself up from the table, he hobbled out into the midst of the shouting. A tall man that brought in the stench of his unwashed body with him was shouting at

Arabella. His even white teeth clenched as he pointed with dirty fingernails at the saddle hanging over a stand. "May I be of service?" Grant asked while trying to keep the venom from his voice.

The man pivoted toward Grant with steely eyes. "Who are you?"

"I'm her husband, and I also made that saddle you're arguing over," Grant spit out.

"Well, your wife won't come down on that there saddle, and I want it." With a quick turn of his head, he spat a wad of tobacco juice on the pristine floor and marched over to Grant.

"Okay, so if you want it, you pay the full price or leave the store. I will not have you shouting at my wife over it. We own this store, and she knows our prices are firm." Grant walked away, but before he had fully stepped out of range, the man grabbed him by the collar.

Grant turned around with full swing, catching the man with an uppercut, knocking him out cold. Rubbing his fist at the bruising knuckles, he shook his hand out. Grant's eyes connected with Arabella's. "Can you send for the sheriff?"

Arabella stood with round eyes and an open mouth at what she had just witnessed. Snapping her mouth shut, she pressed her hand to her stomach and raced to the door. Flinging the door open, she stumbled onto the boardwalk just as Butch Ewing was walking by.

"Mr. Ewing, can you fetch the sheriff and hurry?" The barber took off like a shot. Arabella stepped back into the shop with a giggle.

Grant bent over the unconscious man, tying his hands with a strip of leather. "What is so funny?"

Arabella leaned against the door. "I think that is the fastest I've ever seen Mr. Ewing run."

Grant stood with a grimace on his face. His knee, still tight from sitting, pitched him forward. Arabella reached for him just in time to help him steady himself. Their eyes locked. A flicker of longing crossed Arabella's face. Her pink lips parted as Grant drew her to him. His lips brushed against hers gently, but as Arabella leaned in, his lips caught hers possessively. A jolt like lightning ran through him, seizing his body as Arabella deepened the kiss.

The clomping of feet on the boardwalk caused Arabella to pull away from Grant. He had forgotten entirely about the unruly man lying on the floor as the door burst open, presenting the sheriff and a red faced, huffing barber.

A groan rose from the floor as the grizzly-looking man tried to sit up. Whipping out his handcuffs, the sheriff clamped them on the man's wrist, hauling him off the floor as he asked Grant what had happened.

Grant explained how the man acted toward Arabella about the saddle price and grabbed him when asked to leave. "I didn't want to hit him, but I feel I didn't have a choice at that point," Grant said.

Pushing the handcuffed man out the door, Sheriff Darcy assured Grant the man would spend the night in jail and pay a hefty fine to get out.

Grant shut the door and flipped over the closed sign. Arabella stood behind the counter, bent over the ledger. "I'm glad that's over," Grant strolled to the counter, leaning against it. The smooth wood under his fingers felt cool against his bruised hand.

Arabella gasped at his hand sitting on the counter, turning an ugly purple and green from its landed blow. "You're hurt."

"It looks worse than it feels. It will be sore and stiff for a couple of days, but I'll live." Grant lifted his hand, bending and straightening his finger as if to show Arabella it was okay.

Grant knew the minute he said he would live; it was the wrong thing to say. Arabella's eyebrows pulled together, and her hands trembled as she closed the ledger. Stepping from behind the counter, she pushed past him and out the door. Grant ran his fingers through his hair with a sigh. Arabella kept wanting to put those walls up but at least today, with the kiss they shared, he knew slowly he was knocking them down, and eventually, they may even stay that way.



* * *

A meadowlark sang with its chirping outside Arabella's window. Climbing from bed, she padded across the floor, throwing up the window to welcome clear blue skies and a warm morning breeze. Voices in the other room drew her curiosity. She quickly dressed and performed her morning ablutions. With nimble fingers, she

braided her long, dark hair as she made her way into the kitchen.

Grant and Anthony stood with sandwiches, fruit, and other items stacked on the table. Arabella poured herself a cup of coffee from the pot on the stove. "What are you two doing?" She asked.

Anthony turned around with a jar of jam in his hand. "We are playing baseball today with some kids from school, and everyone is to bring their lunch for a picnic," Anthony said.

"Who organized this?" Arabella asked as she took a sip of her coffee.

Anthony placed another sandwich on the counter. "I asked P... I mean Grant if we could do it, and he said yes. I told the kids at school all about it." He replied.

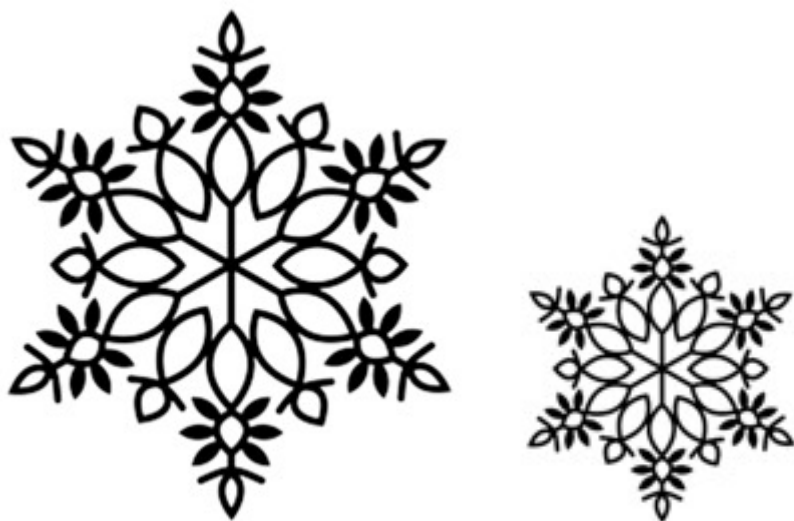
Grant wrapped the sandwiches in wax paper as he leaned against the counter. "We want to put that open field out yonder to use today." He smiled at Arabella.

"Just when did you plan to tell me all this?" Arabella asked, placing her cup in the sink.

"We wanted to surprise you with a fun day." Anthony beamed.

Elbowing her way between Grant and Anthony, she looked at what all they were packing. "Why don't I help you with some of this?" she laughed

Grant looked at Anthony, giving him a wink as they turned and left Arabella to what she did best. "We will grab the bat, ball, and a blanket while you finish that up," Grant replied as he led Anthony out of the kitchen.



Upon laying the blanket on the ground, Arabella watched as her husband took charge, setting out flat rocks for bases and separating the kids into teams. There were two teams, and one team had blue handkerchiefs tied around their necks and the other red. The children's excitement grew as two boys flipped a coin to see who would bat first. The blue team would bat first. Arabella clapped her hands and yelled encouragement as Anthony stepped up to bat.

Grant pitched the ball, and Anthony swung and missed. Arabella had both hands gripped into fists and pressed to her mouth. "Come on, Anthony, you can do this." She mumbled to herself.

As the second pitch went out, Anthony swung, striking the ball, sending it rolling across the ground. He took off running, making it to second base as Arabella jumped to her feet, shouting and clapping. Anthony bent over with hands on his knees, yelling at his teammate to hit the ball. A little boy stepped up to the plate, swinging wildly at each ball before missing three times when Grant called him out.

Several plays later, Anthony finally made it to home plate,

gaining a run for his team. Grant called time. "Okay, you have a few minutes to grab a drink and get back to your positions. Red team, you're up to bat." Grant shouted.

Running off the field to Arabella, who stood with hands-on-hips as she watched the kids taking up their positions on the field. "Did you see how well Anthony hit that ball?" Grant asked.

"He did well, but I think he needs to step into it more." She replied.

Grant threw back his head and let out a hearty laugh. Leaning in, he kissed her flushed cheek before running back out onto the field. Arabella rested her hand on her cheek with a smile. She liked this playful side of her husband.

Her thoughts turned to the kiss they shared at the shop. Warmth ran through her body at the thought of the heated moment they shared. Shouting pulled her from her thoughts as she watched Anthony racing for a second base with the ball in hand. He had just barely stepped on the base when the other player ran into him, toppling them both. "Out!" Grant shouted.

Anthony got up off the ground and reached out his little hand to help the other boy up. As the morning progressed, the teams took turns leading until the last play, and Anthony was up to bat. With brow creased and a scowl on his face, Anthony rocked back and forth, waiting for the pitch. He stepped into the ball as it sailed over the plate and he swung, sending it flying high over the others' heads. As the players scrambled after the ball, Anthony's arms pumped as fast as his feet, carrying him to home plate, winning the game five to four.

Arabella jumped up and down, shouting and clapping as the blue team rallied around her son with slaps on the back. Breathless, she wiped the back of her hand across her brow. The children ran off the field and began separating to eat lunch. "Ma, did you see that hit?" Anthony asked. His hair was plastered to the side of his face and neck as his dirty hands pushed it aside.

"I'm so proud of you." She replied moving to hug him but stopped short. "How about after you've cleaned up, I hug you?" She laughed.

With an enthusiastic nod, Anthony asked, "Can I eat with my team?"

Grant had walked up and was resting his hand on Anthony's shoulder. "Wash your hands with the water we brought, then you

may." He chuckled.

"You look like you're having a good time," Grant said.

"I had a wonderful time. Anthony sure is learning how to play well. But then, of course, he has the best teacher." She replied with a smile.

Arabella blushed; she was flirting with her husband. The best part of all was she liked it and was looking forward to another kiss.



* * *

Grant was glad when Monday rolled around. They had gone to church on Sunday and ate dinner with the James family, but he got to spend the day at work alone with his wife on Mondays. She hummed a hymn while she dusted and cleaned the store.

Grant cleared his throat, "You're sure looking pretty today."

Arabella stopped dusting. "Thank you, you're in a good mood. Any reason?" She asked.

"Can't a husband comment on the beauty of his wife?" He took the duster from her hand and pulled her close to him.

Leaning away from him, Arabella wrinkled her brows. "Grant, we are at work, and you're not acting properly." Pushing at his chest with her palms, Grant laughed. "So, you don't want another kiss like the last time?"

"You're incorrigible, you know that?" Arabella could feel her palms growing clammy as she relaxed up against him. She was tired of fighting her feelings, and maybe just a little kiss wouldn't hurt. Grant's eyes went to her lips as Arabella lifted her face. Oh, how she wanted that kiss. The front door rattled, causing her to jump back out of Grant's arms. She grabbed her duster and went back to cleaning the shelves.

"Sheriff Darcy, what brings you in today?" Grant said with a wink.

Sheriff Darcy let out a chuckle as he winked at Grant. "Well, that fellow that I arrested for causing trouble in here is out of jail. I just wanted to give you a heads-up because he was awful belligerent

while locked up. Let me know if he comes around again."

Grant shook the sheriff's hand. "Thank you, Sheriff. I don't expect to have any more problems out of him, but I'll let you know if I do."

"Have a nice day." With a tip of his hat, he stepped out into the sunshine.

"Mrs. Parker, where were we before we got interrupted?" Before Arabella escaped, Grant snatched her to him, devouring her soft lips between his.



* * *

Grant had spent the rest of the day in the back, working on another saddle. Arabella's face hurt from all the smiling she had done today, or maybe it was the kissing. All Arabella knew was the walls around her heart had come down. And she was falling in love with her husband. He already loved Anthony and was so good to her. Not only was he handsome, but he made her feel beautiful and special. A fistful of butterflies felt like they took to fluttering in her stomach. She would tell Grant tonight that he didn't have to sleep in the barn any longer. Not wanting to be without him anymore but to laugh, talk, and share her life with this man gripped her heart. How had she forgotten how it felt to have a helpmate and someone to hold her through the night when she couldn't sleep?

With the sign flipped over to close, she began working the ledger and counting the money. Anthony was over at a classmate's house working on a project and was staying for supper. Arabella's mouth twisted as she tapped the pencil on the counter. She would surprise Grant. If Arabella took the money to the bank for him, then they could go straight to the café for dinner. It would only take her a minute, and she could slip out and be back by the time they usually headed home. Just in case, Arabella wrote up a note that she was taking the money to the bank and would be right back. A smiling Arabella hurried from the shop and down the street toward the bank.

"Look who we have here." A familiar voice made the hair on the back of Arabella's neck stand up. The same burly man from the altercation at the shop stepped out from between buildings into her path. Arabella pressed her hand to her mouth to keep from retching at the stench of him. She attempted to step around him, not looking at him, but he yanked her by the wrist toward where he had come. Arabella screamed as a beefy hand clamped across her mouth. "If you don't want me to hurt you, then you better do as I say." He spat out.



* * *

Grant couldn't believe how playful his wife had become. He could see it on her face all morning that she wanted a kiss. When they walked into the shop this morning, the image of her in his arms was the first thing that came to mind. It had to be the same with her. Leaning back in his chair, he couldn't help the smile that plagued his lips all afternoon. With his fingers locked together, Grant stretched them above him. Standing, he hobbled across the room to work the tightness out of his bad knee. He wanted to sneak up on his pretty little wife and get another taste of her sweet-tasting lips.

As he stepped out into the front of the store, looking around, he didn't see her anywhere. The ledger lay on the counter with a sheet of paper next to it. With a frown, Grant snatched up the paper, skimming its content. The bank? He slammed the paper down on the counter and took off at a run. Did Arabella have to be so stubborn? He told her he didn't want her taking the money to the bank, and for a good reason. The ad for husbands had brought a few unsavory characters snooping around town. It wasn't safe for her to take the money to the bank by herself.

As Grant raced down the street, his eyes scanned for her. A few feet ahead, he noticed something white and lacy lying in the street. Quick steps took him to stand over a lady's handkerchief. As he bent over it, snatching it from the dirt, he smelled the rose perfume as he traced the stitched A on the corner. It was Arabella's. Grant

clutched the lacy item to his chest, asking anyone that passed if they had seen Arabella. He had to get the sheriff. He needed help to find her.



* * *

"Stop that!" Arabella shouted, pulling her arm from the man's grip. She rubbed where his fingers had pressed painfully into her arm.

"Keep moving, girly." He growled.

As he pushed her forward, Arabella fell, landing on her knees. Tiny pebbles dug into her skin as she kneeled in the dirt. With dirty hands, she grasped her skirts and stood, turning away from him so he wouldn't touch her. He was taking her down by the river. The post and telegram office were in her sight. If she could create a diversion or make a scene, maybe Faith or her potential groom, Beau Landry, would see her and help.

She had the money bag tucked inside her dress. The man didn't even know about that, so what did he want with her? If she offered him the money, would he let her go?

"If it's money you're after, we have little, but I can get you what we have," Arabella stated.

The man gave a throaty laugh. "It's not your money because I'll eventually have that too. I wanted a wife and sent my letter like the rest of the men, and none of the widowed women have written me back, so now I'm taking one."

"I'm already married. It was my husband who knocked you out." She huffed.

"You won't be for long. I'm going to take care of that arrogant husband of yours, and when I do, you will marry me. I'll have everything that belonged to him." He grinned.

Arabella stopped walking. "If you think you will get away with that, you're crazy." She laughed.

"Well, call me crazy then." He barked.

The man pushed Arabella forward. "We will walk to the end of the bank here, where I have a boat waiting. If you draw attention,

I'll shoot you." He patted the side of his jacket.

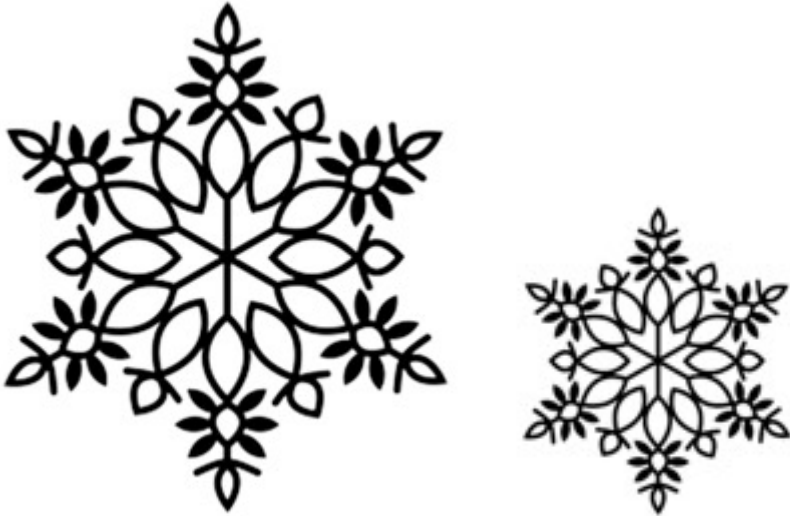
"Dan, what are you doing with that pretty little lady?" Clarence Fletchers laughed as he hefted a box to his shoulder.

Arabella swallowed. Clarence could help her. The burly man, Dan, she now knew his name, waved. "I got myself hitched." Grabbing Arabella around the waist, he threw her over his shoulder.

"Help me, please!" She yelled as she kicked and punched the man.

Clarence let out a hearty chuckle. "Got you a wild one there." He shouted.

Dan dropped Arabella into the boat, pushing off as he climbed in, rowing away from shore.



Grant paced the room as Sheriff Darcy rounded up a few men to help look for Arabella. Dalton James's wife Heather took Anthony to play with their son, Arthur, and stay the night. Dalton was going to stay and help with the search, along with Deuce Taylor. "Starting with the bank, we need to ask if anyone has seen her. Ask at shops along the route, all the way down to the river." Sheriff Darcy demanded.

The men climbed on their horses. Deuce and Dalton took off for businesses close to the river as the Sheriff and Grant headed toward the bank. Grant clenched his fist as he dismounted his horse and rushed into the bank, with the Sheriff stopping to talk with passersby.

Abe stood at the teller's window waiting on a customer. "Excuse me, but this is important." Grant stepped up to the window and in front of the customer. "Have you seen my wife Arabella this afternoon? Did she drop off the money from our shop?"

Abe shook his head, "Not today."

Grant slapped his hand on the counter. "Thank you."

Stepping out into the street, Grant ran his hands over his face. "What did you find out?" Sheriff Darcy asked.

"Abe hasn't seen her, which means she never made it to the bank with the money." Grant pinched the bridge of his nose.

Sheriff clamped his hand on Grant's shoulder. "We will find her. Let's keep moving."

Deuce Taylor came galloping down the street, his horse stirring up dust. "Sheriff, we have something. I asked around at the saloon and spoke to Clarence. He said that Dan was with a woman getting into a boat. When he asked about her, Dan said he got hitched. Clarence said Dan threw her over his shoulder, and she was kicking and screaming. He just figured the lady was a mail-order bride, so went about his business." Deuce said with a sharp tone in his voice.

Grant swung upon his horse and spurred it into a gallop, with the Sheriff and Deuce close behind.



* * *

"I'm not fixing you anything to eat." Arabella stood with her fist on her hips.

Dan shrugged his shoulders. "That's fine, and I'll just head back to town and take care of your husband now instead of later." He growled.

Arabella picked up the frying pan on the stove and went to swing it when Dan quickly snatched it from her hand. "I'd advise you to mind yourself, or I'll make sure you disappear with that husband of yours." He said, flopping down at the worn kitchen table.

With a scowl on her face, Arabella fried up some eggs she found on the table. The tiny cabin smelled like dead fish and an unwashed body. There were holes in the roof and several on the floor. A shudder ran through her body at what might crawl through the holes in the floor, especially at night. Just the thought of staying here tonight made her want to throw up. How would Grant ever find her?

As she dropped into the chair, her shoulders sagged in defeat. Tonight, she wanted to tell Grant that her feelings had grown for him and that she was ready to give him her heart. She took so much for granted because it scared her to live again after Luca died. The pain was unbearable some days and to love again meant she would have to risk that same pain once again.

Grant loved her, Arabella was sure of it, and she had pushed him away at every chance. If she got out of this mess, Arabella would make sure he knew every day of the rest of his life that she loved him.



* * *

As the sun set in the sky, the footprints were getting harder to follow. "We should make camp here tonight and resume our search in the morning." Sheriff Darcy said.

Dalton collected wood to start a fire while Deuce took care of the horses. Grant sat on an old log with his head in his hands. Sheriff Darcy sat down next to Grant. "We will find her, and when we do, I'll put Dan behind bars for good." Sheriff Darcy said, squeezing Grant's shoulder.

Dalton had a fire going and warmed some beans while the others laid out their bedrolls. Grant couldn't think about eating right now, not with his thoughts on Arabella. She had to be scared and hungry, with everything, she and Anthony had been through and now this. Anthony needed his mother, and Grant would do all he could to get her back.

Grant tried to get comfortable, but he hadn't slept on the ground since his knee injury. Just as he drifted off, a drop of water hit his forehead and ran down his nose. As he lifted his hand to wipe at the tickle the water caused, he sat straight up. It's raining. How would they ever find Arabella now? The rain would wash all tracks away.

A steady rain started falling as the men quickly rolled up their beds and began packing up. They would ride through the night and, hopefully, find someplace they could shelter until the rain stopped.

Grant trudged through the tall grass, leaning his head against his horse's neck. All he cared about was finding Arabella.



* * *

Arabella had fallen asleep at the table. She didn't know when the rain started, but it was now coming into the shack through the roof. Finding a few pots, she placed them under the holes the water now dripped through. Dan pushed up on his elbow from his bedding on the floor. "What are you doing?"

"I'm trying to stop water from coming in. What's it look like I'm doing?" she huffed with a roll of her eyes.

Dan chuckled. "You're going to make a fine wife. It will be daylight soon, so you might as well get started on making breakfast." He grumbled.

Arabella thought about slugging him upside the head with the pot but knew it wasn't enough to knock him out. Shoulders slumping, she tromped back toward the stove to make the mad man breakfast. Three eggs were all that remained. "How do you expect me to cook when there is no food? There is no flour, milk, or now eggs." She said, tossing the pan loudly on the stove.

Dan struggled to get out of his bedding but soon was standing. "Woman, shut your mouth. I've heard enough harping out of you." He yelled.

The man walked out the door, muttering under his breath. Arabella could hear a banging noise from outside but didn't know what was going on, and she really didn't care. She'd had enough of the man. Sitting at the table, she lowered her head on her crossed arms. Her heavy eyelids slowly closed as her stomach gurgled and her breathing steadied. The door flew open, jerking Arabella awake. With trembling hands, she pushed herself up from the table. Dan stumbled into the shack with his arms full, dumping the items in front of her.

"Where did you get this?" she asked.

Dan grinned. "I have this stuff hidden, so no one steals it from

my cabin while I'm gone." With that, he walked back to his bedding and laid down.

Arabella picked through the items picking up what she needed to make breakfast. *This man was plumb loco.* She would fry some of the ham and use the eggs she had left. As she placed the ham in the skillet, Arabella lifted the burner, adding more tinder. Next, she placed water on to boil. After all, she was hungry too and wasn't eating until she cleaned up the kitchen.

When she got home, the first thing she would do was take a nice hot bath and wash her hair. Not finding a rag, she ripped some of her chemises off to use. After all, she planned on burning the clothes she had on when she made it home.

Once the water got hot enough, she poured it into the washbasin. With soap that lay on the basin, she began shaving it into it the hot water before plunging her hands in. Relaxing her shoulders, she smiled with closed eyes as the warm water engulfed her hands.

Once the table was good and clean, she flipped over the ham and cracked the eggs, adding one at a time to the skillet. While the eggs were frying, she washed a few plates, cups, and silverware. Dan shuffled into the kitchen as she finished frying the eggs and placing the food onto a plate. Arabella carried two plates to the table, and before sitting them down, she looked at Dan. "You need to wash up before you eat. Soapy water is in the basin."

Dan growled as he stomped over and began splashing and rubbing his dirty hands together. Brown water now sat in the basin as Dan shook his hands in the air to dry, sending water droplets about the place. Arabella closed her eyes with a shake of her head. *Lord help me.* She prayed. Now that Dan sat at the table, she sat his plate in front of him and took a seat. As Dan reached for his fork, Arabella grabbed his beefy hand and bowed her head in prayer. *"Father, we thank you for this meal and safety. Thank you for always providing and keeping us well and helping us endure the hard times. Amen."*

Dan growled. "Can I eat now?"

The man needed to learn some manners, and he needed a mother, not a wife. Arabella smiled at him as she took a bite of her breakfast. Her stomach let out a grumble with the first bite. While it may not be the best breakfast she ate, it sure did taste good.



* * *

The tall wet grass glistened as the morning sun rose to cast a glow over the prairie. Wet, hungry, and tired, Grant and the rest of the men had found no tracks since the rain had started. With hunched shoulders, Grant let out a sigh. Would they ever find Arabella?

Sheriff Darcy called out. "We need to stop and rest, maybe snare a couple of rabbits to fill our stomachs. I think it would be best if we separate after that and continue to search. If we don't find her by tonight, then it would be best to go back to town and get more help."

Grant wanted to push on, but what the Sheriff said made sense. "I'll get a fire started," Grant said as he stooped to pick up small sticks. Deuce and Sheriff Darcy went to find food while Dalton stayed with Grant to help with the fire. Dalton placed rocks on the ground in a circle for the fire. "Darcy said he arrested this man before for causing problems at your shop. What did he want that day he came in?"

Grant scratched the back of his neck, looking up and off to the side. "He was mad about Arabella not coming down on a saddle I made if I recall correctly."

Dalton sat back on his heels. "Well, if Dan wanted the money, why didn't he just take it and run? Instead, he took Arabella too. Maybe to get back at you, but then you would think he would want you to know."

Grant dropped the wood inside the ring of rocks. "I agree with you, and if that's the case, he is holed up around here somewhere with her. If he goes to town a lot, it has to be close."

"I think we need to backtrack," Dalton said.

Sheriff Darcy and Deuce rode up just as Dalton got the fire going. "What did you find?" Dalton stood, wiping his hands together.

"Bagged a few rabbits" Deuce climbed off his horse, handing over their find.

Dalton started cleaning the rabbits with Deuce's help, as Grant

began telling Sheriff Darcy that he thought they needed to backtrack and why.

"Your theory sounds solid. Why would Dan take her if all he wanted was the money? He must be hiding somewhere close by with her." Sheriff Darcy paced, kicking a rock out of his path.

"I say we eat and head back to where we were when it started raining," Grant said.

Sheriff Darcy stopped pacing. "I agree."

The men quickly ate their meal, mounting up and heading back the way they came.



Arabella cleaned up after the morning meal while Dan was lying back on his bedding, uncorking a bottle of whiskey. With a frown on her face, Arabella stomped over to Dan and yanked the bottle from his hand. "Hey, what did you do that for?" He shouted.

"First of all, it's morning, and second you are going to go chop wood for the stove." She stood with her hand fisted on her hip, holding the bottle with the other.

Dan jumped up and stood over her. "Give me that bottle now."

"Either you go cut more wood, or I'm going to pour the whole bottle out." Arabella said as she stood poised to pour it out through a hole in the floor.

Dan stomped outside, slamming the door behind him. Arabella sighed as she walked back to the table, sitting the bottle down. That man was all bark and no bite, maybe she could tell him she was going home and walk out the door.

With nothing but time on her hands, Arabella started making some bread to go with dinner. As she dusted the pan with flour, she could hear the ax hitting the wood. Once Arabella set the bread

aside to rise, she put a pot of beans on with some leftover ham.

The last thing she wanted to do was clean this place up but sitting in the filth was more than she could take. With a crate in hand, she went around picking things up to throw away. Not wanting to pick up the dirty clothes, she used a broom handle to lift them and put them in a pile for washing. Empty whiskey bottles rolled out from under clothes lying about as Arabella poked at them with the broom. Who knew what critter may have made that mess a bed? The smell of the dirty garments alone made her gag.

With the house looking somewhat better, Arabella slid the bread into the oven. Pouring herself a glass of water, she leaned against the counter, letting out a loud breath. How could that man live like this? The front door swung open with a sweaty and tired Dan stumbling through the door. Arabella thought the man was going to pass out as he staggered to a chair, plopping down.

Even though he was mean and had kidnapped her, she didn't want to see him dead. She quickly filled a glass with water handing it over to him. Dan took it and chugged the water before slamming the glass on the table.

"Get out." He panted.

"Excuse me?" Arabella said.

Dan leaned forward with hands-on his knees. "I said, get out."

Arabella's eyes widened as she hurried past him. "I'm free to go?"

"I changed my mind. I don't want a wife." Dan grabbed for his bottle of whiskey, uncorking it and taking a swig."

Arabella didn't know whether to laugh or cry at the situation. Calling over her shoulder as she exited the cabin, "There is bread in the oven and beans on the stove you can cook for dinner."

With a burst of energy, she took off through the outcropping of rock and headed to the river. The fresh air filled her lungs as the sun shone brightly overhead, filling her with joy and excitement. Laughter bubbled up from deep within her and poured out as she doubled over. Dan was so mad at her he made her leave. Arabella sat on the ground laughing as tears poured down her face.



* * *

Grant heard it first. A noise like a woman's laughter came from just up ahead. Grant spurred his horse to a gallop, racing to the sound. Just beyond a few trees, he could see a figure sitting on the ground laughing. *Arabella*? Dismounting, he ran toward her and couldn't believe what he was seeing. His wife sat in the grass with an arm wrapped around her middle, laughing hysterically. As the other men dismounted their horses, they looked at each other with fear that Arabella gave leave of her senses.

Blowing out her breath and taking deep cleansing breaths, Arabella wiped at her eyes when she noticed her husband and three other men standing beside him. "Grant!" She cried. Standing on weak legs now spent from laughing, she ran to Grant, throwing herself in his arms.

Grant pulled her in and rested his chin on her head as he held her tight. She smelled awful, but he didn't care they had found her.

Pulling her away at arm's length, he cupped her dirty face. "Are you okay?"

Arabella nodded. "I am now."

"Are you sure? I mean when we came upon you sitting in the grass laughing...."

She waved her hand, fanning her face as she laughed again. "I'm laughing because I made Dan so mad making him work and clean up that he made me leave."

"What? I'm afraid I don't understand." He stated.

"Well, you see, I decided to surprise you by taking the money to the bank. While I was on my way, he stepped out between two buildings and grabbed me. He took me back to his dirty shack and said he would get rid of you and keep me for his wife. Dan was angry because none of the widows would write back to him, and he wanted a bride. Once I got finished with him, he no longer wanted a wife." Arabella broke into laughter again, as did Grant and the others.

"I'm afraid that scares me some," Grant replied. "What am I in

for? Since I am your husband."

With that, everyone began laughing. Grant wrapped his hands around Arabella's waist, lifting her upon his horse before climbing on behind her. Arabella leaned against her husband's broad chest and melted into him. With the gentle sway of the horse and her husband's strong arms, she gave in to the heaviness that pulled her into slumber.



* * *

Arabella convinced the Sheriff that Dan was harmless, more bark than bite. He didn't harm her or try to get any money but was lonely and wanted someone to care for him. Giving in, he agreed to let the man be since Arabella didn't want to charge him with anything.

Grant took Arabella home to clean up while he dropped the money off at the bank and retrieved Anthony. Her son didn't need to know what happened after recently losing his father. After all, she hadn't been in any real danger.

Arabella had the tub out and water heating on the stove as she removed the soiled dress. Once the water was hot, she filled the tub slipping in. Her fingers wrapped around the side of the tub, leaning her head back against the rim, a slow smile spread across her face. A sigh escaped her lips as the soothing water washed away the grime and tension. With heavy eyes, she used her favorite rose soap and washed her long locks scrubbing every inch of her from the filth of Dan's disgusting cabin.

Arabella just finished dressing when she heard the front door open. Grant and Anthony's voices settled around her like a sweet balm. With quick strides and swishing skirts, she greeted her son with a warm smile.

"Ma!" Anthony threw his arms around her waist. Arabella dropped to her knees, not caring that the hard floor dug into them. With anxious hands, she grabbed his face, planting soft kisses upon the boy's smooth cheeks.

As Anthony stepped back, she held his shoulders in her long fingers. "Were you good for Heather, son?"

He gave a quick nod and launched into how much fun he had spending time with Arthur.

Arabella's eyes found Grant looking upon them with love and admiration. Her heart grew complete with love for this man and her son. Grant smiled at her with a twinkle in his eyes at the boy's excessive chatter.

"Ma, where were you? Heather said you had business to attend." Anthony's head tilted with concern.

Arabella sat down on the floor, pulling her son into her lap. "Well, I ran into a man that needed some help, so I went to clean and cook for him. He decided after a day that he didn't need my help anymore and sent me home." Arabella ruffled his hair before placing a kiss on his head.

"I hope he is ok now," Anthony said with a quick hug before running off to his room.

Arabella let out a giggle as Anthony hurried off without another word. Grant reached out a hand to help his wife from the floor. As he pulled her up, she stumbled forward. Grant caught her, pulling her to him as his lips descended on hers with longing and adulation. Arabella's arms slipped around his neck, deepening the kiss as she ran her fingers through his hair. *It sure was good to be home.*



* * *

Grant held Arabella in his arms as her familiar scent of roses enveloped him. He was amazed at this remarkable woman and mother, and he was so thankful that his friend Joe wrote a letter back to her. When Dan kidnapped her, all he could think about was how he would go on living without her. Arabella had been through that with Luca and didn't have much time to mourn before having to remarry. No wonder she built walls up around her heart. Guilt rested slowly on his shoulders at how impatient he had been with her. Grant completely understood now because he had fallen in love

with the bit of spitfire he now held.

Arabella stepped out of his arms and reached down, locking her fingers with his. "When I left to take the money to the bank, I was only trying to surprise you. I wanted us to go to dinner when we left the shop. I had something important to share with you and thought it would be nice to have dinner alone."

Grant tucked a strand of hair behind her ear as he gently cupped the side of her face in his palm. "I didn't want you to take the money because it isn't safe. We will go together from now on if you want. Otherwise, let me take the money."

Arabella nodded. "I promise from now on I will let you take care of that."

Grant leaned in, placing a kiss on her lips. "You look so tired. Why don't you turn in early tonight? I can make Anthony and me some eggs before we head to bed."

Arabella looked up at him with a silly grin. "You don't have to sleep in the barn, you know."

"I don't?" Grant's head jerked back as a smile spread across his face.

"Not anymore," Arabella said with a smile. "That's what I wanted to tell you last night before Dan absconded with me. I realized I was falling in love with you, but I couldn't accept it because I felt unfaithful to Luca's memory. It scared me. I don't want to lose you as I did Luca."

Grant pulled her in and captured her lips between his, slow and tender. "I fell in love with you the moment you sassed me. When I kissed you in the hotel lobby, I knew my heart was a goner."



* * *

Arabella woke with an arm wrapped around her middle and the smell of sandalwood and leather drifting around her. She pulled Grant's arm tighter around her and snuggled back into him before drifting back off to sleep.

Sunshine warmed the room as it poured in through the bedroom

window. Arabella woke to find the bed empty and the smell of coffee filling the room. She rolled over, picking up Grant's pillow, and held it to her chest. She buried her face into it, breathing in his scent. She was undeniably in love with her husband, and it felt so good to be his wife in every sense of the word. With a long lazy stretch, Arabella threw back the covers and quickly dressed.

As she padded into the kitchen, she heard Anthony asking Grant if the three of them could spend the day together. The school year had ended for the summer, and Anthony wanted to picnic and swim in the creek. As he looked up, Grant's eyes met with Arabella. "I think that is a fine idea."

Arabella crossed her arms. "I agree."

Anthony ran to her and threw his arms around her middle. "Boy, this is a great day," He said before running to find his bat and ball.

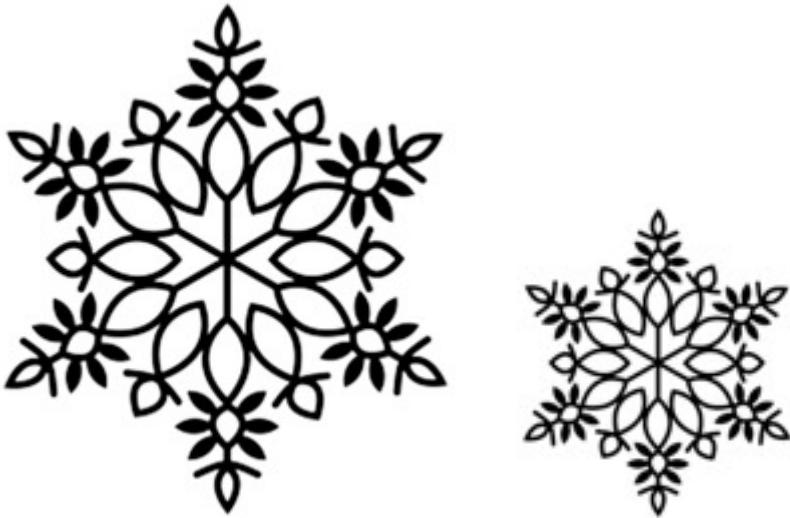
"I couldn't agree more, Anthony," Grant said, pulling Arabella into his arms.



* * *

Grant had the horses hitched to the buckboard, and everything loaded as he swung Arabella up into the wagon, with Anthony climbing up, sitting between them. With the slap of the reigns, the wagon started bouncing down the road as Anthony sang out Oh! Susanna, with Arabella and Grant joining in.

The tall grass swayed in the breeze as butterflies danced about on the open prairie from flower to flower. Grant let the loose reigns rest in his hands as he breathed in the sweet smell of sunshine and horses. He should be at the shop today since he had it closed for one day while searching for Arabella. But he loved his family, and life was short. The shop would still be there tomorrow.



A clear blue stream came into view as the buckboard rounded the corner. Memories of Grant's childhood came flooding back. He loved to run barefoot through the tall grass, and swimming in the creek with his grandfather was always special to him.

Anthony stood up with excitement as Arabella scolded him. Grant laughed because he remembered doing the same thing as a boy. As the wagon came to a stop, Anthony jumped down, chasing a bunny through the tall grass while Grant helped Arabella from the wagon.

"That boy sure does have a lot of energy." Grant chuckled.

With hands-on her hips, Arabella shook her head. "He will have us plumb tuckered out by day's end."

The wagon side pressed into Grant's ribs as he retrieved the picnic basket and blanket from the back. He linked fingers with Arabella as they stepped their way through the tall grass to the creek bed. Grant helped Arabella spread the blanket as he looked out over the prairie, watching the grass sway in the gentle breeze. Bee's hovered about over the many wildflowers while the birds

greeted them with their sweet song. "It sure is a beautiful day." He said.

Arabella sat down on the blanket, removing her boots and stockings tucking her feet beneath her skirts. "It is a lovely day." She replied.

Grant sat next to her on the blanket and leaned in for a kiss when Anthony's voice broke the moment. "Grant, are you coming in the water?" He asked.

"You bet," Grant said, pulling off his boots as Arabella giggled.

Quickly removing his hat and shirt, Grant took off after Anthony into the water, splashing him as he went. The two of them splashed and dunked each other, their laughter carrying on the breeze.

Grant glanced at Arabella lying on the blanket with an arm slung across her eyes. With a wink at Anthony, he lifted his finger to his lips and tiptoed to the blanket. Grabbing Arabella up against his chest, he carried her to the water, kicking and screaming.

"Grant Parker, you let me down this instant!" She laughed

Carrying her into the water, Arabella clung tighter to him as she squealed. He breathed her rose soap in trying to gain his senses. Her warm, soft form pressed against him caused his stomach to summersault. He wanted to lean in and kiss her senselessly. Anthony laughed as he splashed water her way while Grant pretended to drop her before settling down into the water with her in his arms.

Anthony swam around trying to catch minnows in his hands, no longer interested in the game of getting his ma wet. "Mr. Parker, my dress is now soaked." She suppressed a smile, trying to be stern with him.

"So it is Mrs. Parker," He smirked, leaning in to capture her lips between his.

Anthony splashed, spraying them both with water as he swam closer. Grant pulled away from Arabella so they could snatch Anthony, tickling him and laughing as they splashed through the water together.



Arabella missed being at the shop with Grant, but with Anthony out of school for the summer, she wanted to be at home with him. Today, she and Anthony would go into the shop with Grant. Following her husband through the door as the smell of leather filtered through the shop, Arabella noticed Anthony's face as he ran his hands over the saddles on display. "What do you think of Grant's work?" Arabella asked.

"It's beautiful."

Grant rested a hand on Anthony's shoulder. "Would you like me to teach you how to make some of it?"

Anthony's face lit up with a smile, and a quick nod. "Yes."

Arabella picked up her duster and started cleaning as Grant and Anthony disappeared into the back. The day was rather busy with customers placing orders for specific items or purchasing what was on display. As the lunch hour approached, Grant and Anthony were ready to show Arabella what her son had learned. Anthony stood before his ma with hands behind his back. He rocked back on his heels with excitement as he produced the small ammo pouch he had made. "Anthony, this is exceptional," Arabella exclaimed.

"Grant showed me how to make designs and how to do the stitching on one side and let me do the other." Anthony stood with a lifted chin and a broad smile across his face.

"I thought we would go have lunch at the café to celebrate our newest employee. What do you two think?" Grant stood with a hand on Anthony's shoulder.

Arabella smiled as she tapped Anthony on the end of his nose. "I think that's a great idea. I'm so proud of you, young man. You are quite studious in everything you try, and I think that alone is cause for a celebration."

Arabella waited for Grant to lock up as they made their way down the street to the café. Wagons rattled down the road as people greeted one another. The sun slid behind grey clouds as the winds picked up a bit, blowing dust about, causing it to settle on everything. Stepping into the cafe just as big drops of rain pelted the dirty street, Arabella laughed. "That was perfect timing."



* * *

Grant enjoyed the days that Arabella and Anthony came to the shop with him. He continued to teach Anthony how to work with leather, and the boy had a natural talent for it. Some of Anthony's work was now out front for sale and several pieces had sold. As Grant worked on a saddle, his thoughts turned to how full his life had become since coming to Last Chance. He was in love with Arabella and her son. Even though he loved playing baseball, this was the life he wanted.

Anthony went to spend the day playing with Arthur, so Arabella came into the shop to help. Grant could hear her singing as she worked on the books. He treasured her help, he could spend the day making things with leather, and she did the things he was no good at, let alone hated doing. Grant leaned against the wall, arms against his chest, watching his pretty wife bent over the ledger. Her ink-stained fingers tapped the counter while she studied the numbers in front of her. Grant pushed off the wall walking up behind Arabella placing gentle hands on her shoulder. He leaned down and kissed the top of her head. "Do you know how pretty you look sitting there?" He asked.

Arabella reached a hand up, resting it on his. "Let me finish this last entry. Then we can head home."

"How about we play a round of baseball after we retrieve Anthony?" Grant leaned down, kissing her neck softly.

Arabella turned, pulling Grant's head down to where her lips anxiously awaited his kiss. Now that his wife was a willing participant in his affections, he couldn't get enough. He would never tire of her kisses.



* * *

The shuffle of boots sounded outside the shop as the door creaked open. Arabella pulled away from Grant just as she spotted Dan stepping into the store. With raised eyebrows, she stood pressing her hands down her skirt. "Dan, what are you doing here?" She asked.

Grant pulled her behind him. "Why are you here?"

Dan pulled his old, battered hat from his head. Working the brim with his fingers, he looked down at his feet. "I wanted to apologize."

Arabella placed her hand on Grant's arm and stepped beside him. "Thank you, Dan, for coming to apologize."

"I'm sorry I mistreated you." Dan shifted from one foot to the other. "I know it's no excuse for what I did, but I get lonely, and I'm not much on cooking. You tried to make me better, but I didn't want to change until you left. I've had time to think on it, and if I'm ever to get myself a wife, I need to change. I would never hurt anyone. I just said those things because, well, how else could I get you to spend time with me?"

Arabella looked up at Grant and quietly walked over to Dan. She rested her hand on his arm. "Would you like to have dinner with us sometime?"

Dan looked at Grant, who was now smiling. "If you both can forgive and trust me, I would love to."

"How about Sunday?" Arabella asked.

Dan nodded, "Yes, Ma'am, that would be fine."

"I have one request," Arabella said.

Dan's eyebrows rose. "A request?"

"Yes, I want you to take a bath, get a haircut and wear clean clothes." She smiled with a twinkle in her eyes.

"Yes, Ma'am. Thank you," he said with a nod of his head.

Arabella gave him directions to their home as Dan slapped his hat back on his head, walking out the door whistling a merry tune. Arabella looked at Grant with a hand to her throat and burst out laughing. Grant shook his head. "Do you think that was wise?"

Arabella said with a sad grin, "He never harmed me while I was with him, so yes, I say he is harmless. I believe what he said. I can see the loneliness in his eyes."

Together they locked up shop and left to pick up Anthony. Arabella's thoughts had been on Dan ever since they left the shop. She wanted to help the man. After all, everyone deserved to be

loved.

Her mind wandered back to how lonely she felt when Grant was staying in the barn. The time they had spent sitting in the parlor, reading the paper and her darning socks, filled the empty void. Just Grant's presence made everything seem better. She could teach Dan how to be a gentleman, and maybe with some help, they could fix his place up to be habitable for a bride. Arabella would run her idea by Grant and see what he thought.

With supper over and the kitchen cleaned up, they walked to the open field to play a quick game of baseball before returning to the house to call it a night. Anthony had a long day playing with Arthur, and his heavy eyelids told Arabella it was time for him to retire for the night. Ushering him into his bedroom, he changed into his nightclothes and climbed into bed. Arabella blew out the lamp and, with a kiss to his cheek, retreated to the parlor to find Grant reading the paper.

Grant folded the paper as Arabella lowered herself beside him on the settee. "Want to talk about it?" Grant asked.

"You know me well." She laughed as she snuggled under his arm.

With a kiss to her head, he replied. "I try to."

"I want to help Dan find happiness." She said.

"Ok, and just how do you intend to do that?" He asked.

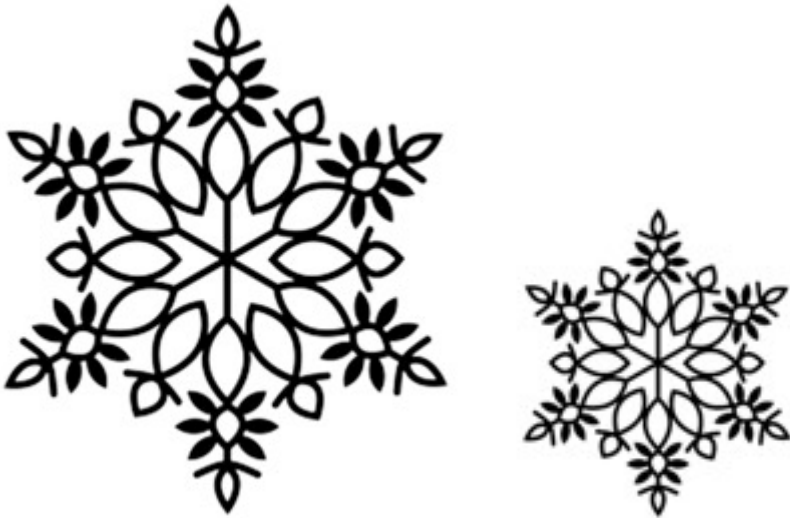
"Well, I thought if I could teach him how to be a gentleman, that would be a start. I would need your help with the rest, though." She responded, turning to look at him.

"If it means that much to you, I'll do what I can." He leaned forward, kissing the tip of her nose.

"We need to help fix up his house and get it livable for a bride. She tucked her leg beneath her trying to get comfortable. "The roof needs repairing, and the floors need fixing. I could clean and wash his clothes and maybe plant some flowers out front." She said, intertwining her fingers with his.

Grant stood, pulling her with him. "I think we need to talk to Dan about this first when he comes for dinner. If he agrees, then I will help, but he will have to do some of the work too."

"I don't deserve you, Grant Parker." Arabella pushed up on tiptoe, gently placing a kiss on his lips before blowing out the lamp and retiring for the night.



Sunday was turning out to be a beautiful day. The blue sky with its big white clouds only magnified the vibrant red Indian paintbrush that grew on the prairie. After returning from church, Grant left Arabella to cook while taking Anthony to practice catching and hitting the ball. He knew she was nervous with the way she fidgeted all the way home. She rattled off everything she needed to do before Dan showed up.

Grant wiped the back of his hand across his forehead as sweat trickled down. "Buddy, I'm done playing ball for now. Why don't we go to the creek for a dip then home to get cleaned up for dinner?" Grant walked the distance back to Anthony.

"I'm hot," Anthony said, walking beside Grant with bat and ball in hand. "That water will feel good."

Reaching the creek, they stripped down to their long johns. Anthony called out, "The last one in is a rotten egg."

Grant ran, scooping Anthony up in his arms throwing him in. Anthony surfaced, splashing Grant with everything he had. The two of them splashed and laughed as they cooled off. "We need to get

dressed and get home. Your ma will be looking for us." Grant winced, stepping on a pebble as he limped out of the water. Once dressed, they started their walk back to the house.

"Grant, can I ask you something?" Anthony said.

"Buddy, you can always talk to me," Grant said, ruffling his hair.

"Would it be okay if I called you Pa?" He asked.

Grant stopped walking, swallowing the knot in his throat. "I would like that very much." He said, hugging Anthony. "If you're going to call me Pa, that means I can call you *Son*."

Anthony's big smile was all the affirmation he needed. He loved this boy, and he wanted to be the kind of father that his grandfather had been. Grant knew the conversation he needed to have with Arabella.

Reaching the house, he sent Anthony to change clothes and get cleaned up while checking on Arabella. The table was set, and the aroma of fresh bread and roast filled the house as Grant's stomach rumbled in response.

She had just pulled an apple pie from the oven when she spotted him. "Why aren't you cleaned up? Dan should be here any minute." She said, sitting the apple pie near the window to cool.

Grant wanted to shout from the rooftop the news about Anthony, but he would wait. He could tell how much this dinner meant to her. "Going now, dear wife." He declared with a smile on his lips.



* * *

A knock at the door propelled Arabella forward to answer it, as Grant and Anthony appeared. She snickered at how serious their faces looked about their guest. With a smile, she opened the door. Her mouth fell open at the man who stood before her. Dan had not only taken a bath but shaved and had his hair cut. Arabella hardly recognized him. He dressed in lovely grey trousers and a clean shirt neatly tucked in his pants. Cleaned up, he was actually handsome.

"Arabella, are you going to invite the man in?" Grant chuckled.

"I'm sorry, please come in." She said, stepping aside as he entered.

Dan stopped just inside the door, looking around. "Dan, this is my son Anthony, and you know my husband, Grant." She said, placing her hand on Anthony's shoulders.

Anthony stepped forward and shook Dan's big hand. "Nice to meet you."

"Thank you for having me to dinner," Dan said, following them into the kitchen.

"Please have a seat." Arabella motioned to the table.

Once everyone was seated, Arabella sat the food on the table and poured the coffee for the adults and milk for Anthony. Bowing their heads, Grant said grace over the food as Dan looked at them, bowing his. Grant began passing bowls around the table as everyone filled their plates.

"Dan, I was wondering if Grant and I could visit you sometime? I think you and my husband could work on fixing some things around your home. I could do laundry and cook you a meal." Arabella wiped her mouth with her napkin.

Dan looked down at his plate. Using his fork as he pushed his food around, he asked. "Why would you do that for me after how I treated you?"

"Dan, other women, need husbands, and if we can help you find true love, then why not?" Arabella shrugged her shoulders.

With a sheen to his eyes, Dan shook his head. "I would like that, thank you."

Arabella rose from the table and began cutting the pie. As she placed the slices on plates, Grant cleared his throat. "Dan, may I ask you a question?"

Dan picked up his fork. "Yes." He stated.

Arabella placed plates of pie in front of each of them, taking her seat.

"If we do all this, you have to give up the bottle, and you will need to get a job to support a wife and no more drinking gut rot. Can you agree to this?" Grant leaned forward with his hands on the table.

Dan laid down his fork as his eyes locked with Grant. "I don't need to drink. I just got down on my luck and couldn't find work, so I just got to where I didn't care and took up the bottle. When your wife cleaned my house and cooked, it awoke something in me. I

couldn't believe I had sunk so low. I don't want to be in that place anymore, but I need help. I do odd jobs to buy food, but sometimes I do go without."

Arabella poured the adults another cup of coffee. "What kind of work are you looking to do?"

Dan finished chewing before he spoke. "I trapped for furs before I came here."

Grant leaned back in his chair, taking a sip of his coffee. "So why don't you still do that?"

Dan scrubbed his face with his hands before looking up. "Because of my trapping, it killed my father."

Arabella sat down, placing her hand on Dan's arm. "What happened?"

Dan looked down at his hands. "My father and I were out trapping beavers on a cold day in January. The lakes were frozen over, but we found a stream where we could set up traps. I sent my father downstream to set his up while I was setting mine. I was having trouble setting the trap. As I fiddled with it, I heard him yell. I took off running, but when I found my father, he had broken through the ice. He walked out on the lake to get to the stream and had fallen through. I managed to pull him out, but he was so cold and wet. I removed his wet clothes and took my furs off, placing them over him, trying to get him warm, thinking it would help bring his body temperature up, but he died before I could get him back to the house."

Arabella squeezed his hand. Not looking up, Dan rubbed at his eyes. Grant swallowed the lump in his throat. "Anthony, why don't you give us adults some privacy? Would you mind finding something to do in your room, buddy?"

Anthony stood up. "Yes, sir." He said, walking out of the kitchen.

Grant stood moving into the chair next to Dan. "It wasn't your fault, Dan. It was an accident, and it could have been you instead. Your father wouldn't want you to stop living life and doing what you love."

Arabella's soft voice caused Dan to look up. "When Luca died, I couldn't imagine going on with life. I felt so guilty that I was moving on, but he wasn't. I loved Luca. When I married Grant, I felt like I was betraying him. But Dan, they wouldn't want us to live like that. Your father would want you to marry and have a family, a good life. Carry on his legacy by having children and teaching them

about him. Teach them the things he taught you."

Dan squeezed Arabella's hand. Wiping at his eyes with the back of his hand, he nodded. "I need help to move forward."

Grant's voice broke the uncomfortable silence. "Dan, I think you and I can work something out. We don't have a local tanner, and it would help me if we could work together. I would love to buy my leather from you. What do you say about going back to trapping and tanning?" Grant stuck out his hand for Dan to shake.

Dan looked from Arabella to Grant. "As long as you two will be by my side, I'll give it a try, and I'm going to need your support." Dan grabbed Grant's hand and shook it.



* * *

Grant stood with Arabella and Anthony as they knocked on Dan's cabin door. Grant's fingers wrapped around the slat of the crate filled with everything needed to get the cabin repaired and cleaned. Wood was stacked under a lean-to where a chipmunk ran between two logs with its cheeks stuffed with acorns. The front door opened, drawing Grant's attention back to the door. "Come in," Dan said, standing aside for his visitors to enter.

The cabin looked picked up and clean but had a smell that indicated it needed a cleaning. Nothing hung on the walls, and minimal furniture sat about. Grant slapped Dan on the shoulder. "You need a woman's touch around this place."

"You don't know the half of it." Dan pointed his boot at a hole in the floor. "I had a squirrel come through there last night and was perched on my chest when I woke this morning. He had been hoarding his nuts in the corner of the room covered by dirty clothes." Dan let out a chuckle.

"Where is he now, Dan?" Anthony snickered.

Dan placed his hand on Anthony's shoulder. "Well, when I saw him sitting on my chest, I screamed like a little girl scaring the poor guy half to death. He ran around this cabin bouncing off walls trying to find a way out before he dove back in that hole and took

off for where he came from."

Grant shoved his hands in his pockets as he let out a chuckle. "How did you know it came from that hole and not from those other ones over there?" He pointed.

Dan chuckled. "Let's just say he left little gifts behind him."

Anthony snorted, slapping his knee.

Arabella wrinkled her nose in disgust. "Eww."

Grant sat the crate on the kitchen table. "Well, it looks like you got your work cut out for you." He winked at Arabella.

His wife was already pumping water into pans, sitting them on the stove. "Dan, if you will get the fire going, I can get started cleaning."

Grant pulled his tools out of the crate and handed a few to Anthony. Walking through the cabin, he inspected the floors and ceiling to see what needed repairing. Dan had the stove going and motioned for Grant to follow him outside. "I've got wood shingles cut and stacked so we can repair the roof. I reckon we will need to pull the boards in the cabin to put new ones down too."

"Let's get to work then," Grant said, gripping his hammer and nails.

"Anthony, you can help us by handing things to us as we need them. I will help you learn how to use a hammer and nail when we start working on the floors. You're a young man now, and it's essential to know." Dan squeezed the boy's shoulder.

"Yes, sir," Anthony said with a proud smile.

The men finished the repairs just as Arabella placed a pot of stew and biscuits on the table. She had made lemonade to drink with the meal and cookies for dessert. Dan's cabin smelled like fresh air and biscuits. A glass with a few yellow and orange tickseed flowers filling it sat on the kitchen table, giving a little color to the room. Grant wanted to pull his wife close and capture her full pink lips between his. She was a remarkable woman, and she was his.

With dinner done and the kitchen put back to rights, Dan showed Grant and Anthony furs he had tanned that week. He had done an excellent job, and his work was meticulous. Grant knew Dan would get through this trying time in life just fine, and hopefully, he would find a pretty little wife like Arabella to share his future.



* * *

Arabella woke the following day to whispers coming through the bedroom door. Pushing herself up on an elbow, she squinted at the sunlight that poured through the bedroom window. The smell of coffee mixed with what smelled like maple syrup drifted into the room. Arabella threw the covers back, swinging her feet to the floor. Grant didn't wake her letting her sleep in this morning. She quickly dressed, finding Anthony and Grant setting the table.

"What is all this?" Arabella smiled

"Surprise!" Anthony shouted.

Grant stood with his hands behind his back and a smile upon his face. "It's not my birthday," Arabella said, tapping her finger against her lips.

Grant pulled a chair out with one hand and gestured for her to sit. Arabella gracefully sat as Grant pushed her chair in for her. Grant placed a package on the table in front of her. "What's this?" She asked.

"Open it." Grant smiled.

Arabella pulled the string releasing the bow. Gently pulling the paper away, she saw a rose-pink dress with a square neck and lace about the sleeves. A gasp rose from her lips. "It's beautiful. But why did you do this?"

Grant pulled Arabella from the chair. "Because when you are madly in love with your wife, it's what you do."

Grant took her in his arms and danced her around the kitchen as Anthony laughed. "Pa said you were special and today is to be your special day," Anthony stated.

Arabella's eyes went wide. "Did he just call you Pa?"

Grant smiled with a gleam in his eyes as he nodded. "Yes, he did. I mean to talk to you about that later when little ears can't hear."

Arabella spent the day being doted on by her two men. They went to church and spent the day down by the creek with a picnic. Anthony played in the water as Arabella sat back against Grant's

chest with his arms around her middle. "I wanted to talk to you about adopting Anthony."

Arabella took Grant's hand in hers. "You want to adopt him?"

"I do. I love Anthony as if he were my own. Is that okay with you?" Anthony looked down into her eyes.

Arabella wiped at the tears falling down her cheeks. Looking up into his eyes, she wrapped her arms around his neck. "I love you, Grant Parker, and I don't know why I didn't see it when you first came to be my groom."

"All that matters is that you love me now and for always." He whispered.

Epilogue



One Month Later

Arabella sat with Anthony as they witnessed Grant sign his name, declaring him Anthony's adoptive father. Grant shook Mr. Purcell's hand before turning to hug his son and wife. "You're officially my son now, Anthony. I want you to know I love you and your mother. I promise to be the best pa a boy could have." Reaching down, he grabbed Anthony and swung him up on his shoulders. Anthony's big grin said it all as they strolled down the boardwalk to the livery.

"What are we doing at the livery Pa?" Anthony said as Grant lifted him to the ground.

"Your mother and I thought we should celebrate this special day by getting you your first horse." Grant hugged him close, placing a kiss on his head. With a wave to Mr. McFarland, Arabella and Grant led Anthony to the stall his new horse occupied. A toffee quarter horse stood with white stockings down his front legs. The horse whinnied as it snorted and sniffed at Anthony's head. "I think your new friend likes you." Arabella laughed.

"What's his name?" Anthony asked.

"Whatever you name him, son." Grant ran his fingers down the horse's snout.

Anthony tilted his head with a twisted mouth as he looked up at his new friend. "Buddy, his name is Buddy."

Arabella looked at Grant with watery eyes. "Why did you name him Buddy?"

"Because Pa always calls me that, and it's because he loves me. Right, Pa?" Anthony looked up at Grant.

"Absolutely, and that's a good name for your horse." Grant reached over and took Arabella by the hand, giving it a gentle squeeze.

"Are you ready to take Buddy home?" Arabella asked.

Grant opened the stall door as he took the lead rope handing it over to Anthony. "Come on, Buddy, let's go home," Anthony said with a smile.

Once back to the buckboard, they tied Buddy behind the wagon and headed home. Anthony sat on a blanket while he chatted to Buddy, his eyelids growing heavier by the minute as the wagon swayed and bumped along the rutted road. Arabella lay her head on Grant's shoulder. She loved this man with all her heart. He was all about giving to her and Anthony. But now, she had something to give to him. Her face beamed at the thought.

Grant's voice pulled Arabella from her thoughts. "I've been thinking about that plot of land that's sitting unused."

Arabella tilted her head looking up at Grant. "What do you have in mind dear husband?"

"What if we clear the land and turn it into a baseball field? We could invite the community to form teams and have games. I even thought about asking some of the children's fathers if they would like to start a baseball league for the kids. It would be a great place for the community of Last Chance to get together. We could dedicate it to all the men who perished in the blizzard as a memorial to them." Grant said with raised eyebrows.

Arabella squealed as she set up straight. "Grant Parker that is a fantastic idea! Just think of how much this would mean to the town. Knowing that joy came from such sadness. It would be great for picnics for those watching the games too."

Grant's face lit up with a smile. "So, I take that as a yes?"

Arabella wrapped her arms around one of his and gently kissed

his cheek. "That is definitely a yes."

Pulling up to the barn, Grant climbed down, helping Arabella from the wagon. Anthony lay sleeping on the blanket in the wagon's back. Grant picked him up, pulling him against his chest as he carried him into the house.

Arabella pulled the covers back on Anthony's bed as Grant gently laid him down. Pulling off his boots, she kissed his cheek, covering him up, and quietly followed Grant out of his room.

Arabella covered her mouth as a yawn escaped. "I guess all the excitement of today did me in, but first, I have a surprise for you." She stated as Grant pulled her into his arms.

"I don't need anything. I already have everything I've ever needed right here."

Arabella lay her head against his chest. "What if I said you were going to be a pa again?"

Grant stepped back. "Are you saying you're going to have a baby?"

Arabella looked up at him with a sassy smile. "I am." She replied.

Grant picked her up and swung her around. "I am the happiest man in the world right now," he said, setting her down. "And I owe it all to Penelope Purcell."

Arabella threw back her head and laughed. "Remind me to send her a thank-you note."

Reviews

If you enjoyed this story, I would appreciate it if you would leave a review, as it helps me reach new readers and continue to write stories that appeal to you.

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Once Over Series

Strawberry Summer - Book 1



Viola Branson, fresh out of finishing school, needs to take a break from the hustle and bustle of city life. Leaving St Joseph, Missouri, she boards a train to visit her grandmother in Once Over Colorado. Childhood memories of

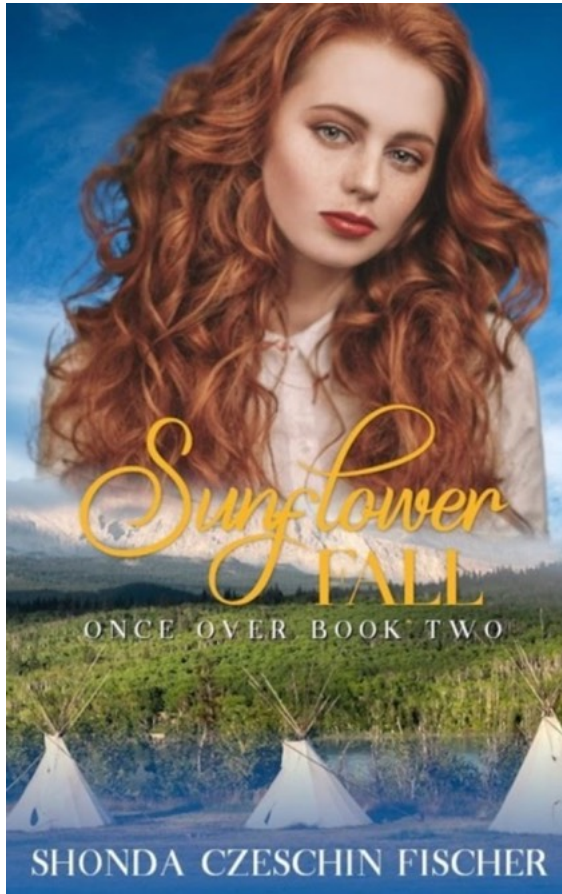
preserving juicy strawberries and her grandmother's loving arms stir a yearning in her. Seeing a handsome childhood friend she fancied herself smitten with at one time only brings memories she would like to forget.

Can they get past the old hurts and become friends again or possibly more, or will circumstances tear them apart?



* * *

Sunflower Fall - Book 2



Abby loves sunflowers, and her dream is to make soaps and lotions from the oil. That is until a man who is half Cherokee Indian comes down from the mountains and into her life. Owen has a heart of gold, but all the community sees is an Indian. Abby's heart is falling for the handsome Cherokee.

Can a relationship even form when hatred for the color of a man's skin brings violence and hatred to Once Over?



* * *

Snowball Winter - Book 3



Emma has always dreamed of owning her own bakery. She decides to make it happen and meets Luke in the process. Luke has a unique gift with numbers and wants to put that to use working for a bank. However, Luke has a secret that could destroy all his hard work and a chance at love with the pretty little baker. When Luke's secret comes out his world crumbles.

Can God redeem him and give him a second chance at all his hearts desires or will his secret destroy all he holds dear?



* * *

Honeysuckle Spring - Book 4



Marjorie lives a life of leisure. Her love for painting the beautiful mountains tends to get her into many dangerous circumstances. A handsome cowboy just happens to be around to comfort her and offer friendship. Boone owns the local livery but his financial station can't keep her in the lifestyle she is use to.

But when God's plan turns her world upside down will it send Boone running the opposite direction?



* * *

The Blizzard Bride Series

A Groom for Arabella (Book #26)

A Groom for Charity (Book #31)

About the Author



Shonda Czeschin Fischer is a wife and mother of 2 who has been married for 21 years to her husband, Craig. She has worked alongside her husband in children's ministry for 17 years. Shonda loves reading, reviewing books, and anything that has to do with history. She lives in Missouri, where she spends time with her Shih Tzu Daisy, her Siamese cat Nala, and orange tabby Bacon. Shonda loves to talk about God and enjoys encouraging and lifting others up.

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1tohonorgod@gmail.com.

I love hearing from my readers and will try to respond promptly.

